MISS MINERVA'S NEIGHBORS

THE COURT'S IN SESSION

William Waller

Miss Minerva's Neighbors

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Miss Minerva's Neighbors

CHAPTER I

NEW NEIGHBORS ARRIVE

ISS MINERVA was not opposed to neighbors on principle but only in practice. Neighbors must not be too neighborly. They must not call until they were called upon, and when they called it must be formally and through the proper channel—which was the front door. Miss Minerva could not abide back door neighbors. If neighbors were ill or dying or being born, nobody could be kinder than Miss Minerva, but just plain, healthy neighbors who were

not in need of her ministrations or advice were not very popular with Mrs. Joseph Estes, *nee* Miss Minerva.

Miss Minerva had lived in her house as maid, wife and mother. The house had changed with the years and changing conditions, as had Miss Minerva herself. Both were somewhat mellowed with time. Miss Minerva's back was still very stiff and her nose as aquiline as ever, but the lines of her figure were more rounded and her expression not so austere since she adopted Billy, married the Major, and became the mother of Josephine. The house still stood up very straight and uncompromisingly, that is, the original part of the house did, but a wing had been added here and a porch there, another window cut in the living room, a glass door in the dining room opening onto the flower garden. On the

whole it was a much pleasanter house to live in than it had been in old days, and Miss Minerva was a much pleasanter person to live with than she had been before she took to eating yeast and curling her hair.

After Miss Minerva married Major Joseph Estes, the children, friends of her nephew William Green Hill, Billy for short, called her Miss Minerva Major and called her husband Major Minerva. The house, however, was always Miss Minerva's house. No matter how many wings and porches were added, windows and doors cut, no matter how its outline broadened and softened, it was Miss Minerva's house.

On one side of Miss Minerva's lived the Garners. They had always lived there, at least as long as Billy and Josephine and Jimmy Garner could remem-

ber. In the Garners' back yard Sarah Jane, their cook, had her house and there she lived with her son, Benny Dick. The Major had built a house in Miss Minerva's back yard for Aunt Cindy and after Decimus Ultimus came up from the plantation to be playmate and maid for the little Josephine, the Major had built a lean-to on Aunt Cindy's house for a bedroom for Wilkes Booth Lincoln. Now that Wilkes Booth Lincoln had gone out to California to be in the movies, Aunt Cindy sometimes allowed old Uncle Jimmy-jawed Jupiter to sleep in the lean-to, but she gave permission grudgingly to her grotesque old husband when he came on a visit from the plantation.

"He ain't good enough to black Wilkes Booth Lincoln's shoes, let alone sleep in his baid," she would grumble,

but when the old man would come whining to the back door, like some homeless cur, she would relent enough to make him comfortable in Wilkes Booth Lincoln's neat little room and scrape up what she called "a dog plate er victuals" for him.

On the other side of Miss Minerva's place was a large lot with a tiny house on it, such a tiny house that nobody ever wanted to live in it. The lot was a desirable one with large trees, but there was a stigma on it in the form of a shady title and in spite of its attraction nobody was willing to buy it and build with the fear of possible litigation hanging over the venture. Sometimes the real estate agents would procure a tenant, but as a rule the place was vacant. Miss Minerva much preferred its being vacant. The neighbors who from time

to time had occupied the tiny house had not been especially desirable, mostly borrowers or persons who would not keep down the weeds. When the place was vacant Miss Minerva's cow could graze there and Aunt Cindy's chickens could have the freedom of the lot.

It was a pleasant day in May, one of those days following a five day spell of bad weather when cold rain and blustering winds bring out rheumatic pains and bad dispositions. The day was so wonderful that one almost forgot the discomfort recently undergone. The purple iris in the flower beds was endeavoring to shake off the accumulated wetness and stand erect. The lawn was covered with locust petals that had not been able to withstand the wind and rain, though a few sturdy blossoms still clung to the ragged, twisted branches

and the hot sun drew from them a languorous sweetness that met and mingled with the odor of the lilies-of-the-valley rising from the bed under the parlor window.

The Major, seated on the porch, stretched his short legs luxuriously so that the healing sun might work a perfect cure on the pesky rheumatism that had gripped him for the last five days. Miss Minerva smiled happily as she looked at her beloved husband. She drew a deep breath of contentment. How sweet the locust was! And lilies-of-the-valley! She must remember to have a nosegay ready for dear Joseph's buttonhole. That gentleman loved a gay boutonniere. Most persons no longer young, when they smell sweet odors, assume a pensive expression and sigh, remembering lost youth and all its

pleasures and happiness. Not so Miss Minerva! Her happiness was in the present. Romance had come to her at a time of life when most persons put such things aside. Lilies-of-the-valley did not make her regret her lost girlhood, remembering perhaps having worn a cluster of those sweet blossoms in her hair at her first dance, or on the occasion of her first proposal, or remind her of moonlight and a garden gate and Jim or Stephen kissing her hand and begging for just one spray for an eternal keepsake. Miss Minerva had not danced in her girlhood, and at no time had she ever worn flowers in her hair or loitered in the moonlight with Jims or Stephens. Nobody but her Major had ever kissed her hand and that had not been permitted until after years of courtship. But when Miss Minerva

finally fell she fell hard, and now she so adored her charming Major that she did not even realize his legs were short. They seemed to her as beautiful as those of the Apollo Belvidere—not that she approved of those classic statues.

Billy Green Hill and Jimmy Garner were seated on the bench under the beech tree reading Huckleberry Finn. Josephine and Decimus Ultimus were in the swing, Josephine vainly endeavoring to teach Deci to read. Every day the little white girl held school for her little black friend, but as yet Deci could not even read "cat" unless she had the picture to guide her.

Miss Minerva hemmed tea towels and smiled and smiled. She felt so peaceful and secure with her beloved ones all in sight and the sun shining so brightly. There was not a single cloud in the sky.

She could hear Aunt Cindy thumping beaten biscuit in the kitchen: a hundred licks with the edge of a flatiron until the dough blistered. Miss Minerva could smell the gingerbread Aunt Cindy was baking and got a whiff of salt-rising bread, an unmistakable odor and not so pleasant. That must be Sarah Jane baking salt-rising for Jimmy Garner's Great-aunt Pauline Pirtle, who refused to eat any other kind of bread. She could smell fresh milk. So—Sam Lamb was milking early because it was Saturday and he must be in readiness for the weekly shopping tour with his wife and children, a regular occurrence every Saturday night. Miss Minerva could see the dun colored back of the little Jersey heifer over the hedge that separated her place from the vacant lot next door.

It was well to have that place vacant. She really wished the Major would buy it, bad title and all, so that nobody could ever live there. No doubt the man who owned it would sell for very little since it must be nothing but an expense and burden to him. She started to speak to her husband about it but saw in time that his lips were puffing out like little balloons, which meant he had fallen into a gentle doze. She would wait.

From the seat under the beech tree she heard Jimmy's complaint:

"Don't be in such a hurry, Billy! You all time ready to turn the page before I get half through. This is serious reading we gotta report on at school and you ought to read careful." Billy and Jimmy had been reading together since they learned their letters and Billy was always half a page ahead of Jimmy.

From the swing she heard Deci:

"C—A—T—kitten! Kin you see the kitten?"

Then Josephine's patient reproval:

"C—A—T is cat, Deci. It is: 'Do you see the cat?' You must look at the letters. Kitten begins with a K and has a great many more letters in it than cat."

"Well then, cat! But it looks mo' lak a kitten than a cat in the pixure, playin' with a ball an' all. Kittens play with balls but ol' cats jes' set in the sun an' lick theyselves. Whe'fo' they done put a ball in if they didn't want folks to call it kitten? Whe'fo' a kitten got mo' letters than a cat when a cat's bigger'n a kitten? It's all mighty foolish. I reckon you mought as well give it up, Josephime. Teacher says I'm plum foolish, but she's foolish herself. I'm jes' differnt kinds er smart from what she is."

"I'll never give it up," declared Josephine, looking absurdly like her mother when she took on an expression of indomitable determination. "I'm going to teach an' teach an' teach until before you know it you can read. Now stop being a monkey an' look at that letter. That's C. C is what you begin to spell cat with an' if you can't remember it I'm going to forget to give you a piece of my chewing gum."

"Well then C—A—T, little cat what's most a kitten," Deci compromised.

"Now that's better," said the little teacher, beaming her approval. "You'll have to work real hard an' learn how to read before Wilkes Booth Lincoln comes home on a visit. He said in his last letter to Billy that there are dogs an' horses an' even ducks that know how to read out there in Hollywood."

"Well, maybe if I go out to them woods I kin read too. But if hosses an' dogs an' ducks kin read, looks lak it ain't so much to be a doin' an' I wonder white folks make so much fuss over learnin' to do what animules do."

A sudden rattle and bang broke the quiet peace of that day in May. Miss Minerva dropped her sewing and the Major stopped puffing his lips out into little balloons and with an ahew! ahem! pulled down his vest and sat up straight, blinking from the sudden awakening and trying to look as though he had not been asleep. Josephine and Deci threw learning to the winds, dropped the primer and the smudged slate and ran to the street gate to see what all the noise was about. Billy and Jimmy closed Huckleberry Finn with a bang, although they were having a wonderful time with

Huck and Jim on the raft floating down the Mississippi River.

"C'mon, Billy! Something's happening on the street!"

"Gee, what a racket! Sounds like war's broken out, Jimmy."

Aunt Cindy took her gingerbread out of the oven and came waddling around the house to see what could be happening. Sarah Jane, next door, let the salt-rising bread burn a little on top in her anxiety to be present whether it was a funeral, dog fight or circus parade. Even Great-aunt Pauline Pirtle, although she was quite deaf, must have caught the vibrations for she came creeping out on the front porch with her trumpet to her ear and her farseeing glasses on over her reading glasses so that she wouldn't miss anything near to or far off. Across the street the

Blacks and the Hamiltons, who had been seated on their respective porches, all hurried to the sidewalk, Lina and Frances with arms around each other's waists and heads close together, as different as two girls could be in disposition and taste but inseparable since babyhood.

The noise increased, such a noise as several armored tanks might make filled with loose cargoes of scrap iron and tin. It would take several such tanks; one of anything could not make so much noise as filled that usually quiet street on that afternoon in May.

"Mus' be a suckus p'rade," declared Sarah Jane. "Come here, Benny Dick," she called to her son, who was no doubt asleep in the house in the back yard. "C'mon, son, an' see the hipperpotterr-hoses."

"I hope they's lots er clownses an' monkeys," said Deci.

"If it's a circus I reckon Uncle Jimmy-jawed Jupiter'll be coming along soon," laughed Josephine. "I hope so. I just love to watch him see how far he can spit."

It was not a circus parade, but it was almost as good as one, quite as interesting and with more novelties. First there was a Ford car, very much the worse for wear, with flapping, walloping curtains, and stripped of mud-guards and running-boards. This car was filled to overflowing with children and dogs and bird cages. A foreign looking man was at the wheel, at least the curious onlookers decided he was foreign looking but it may have been his pointed beard and bristling moustache that gave that impression. His hat was dif-

ferent from hats worn by citizens of that town, being a silk top hat with a somewhat broader brim than the usual silk hat, and the top was slightly mashed in. This man wore a flowing tie and a corduroy coat. He was driving slowly and one could plainly see that he was a very pleasant person, otherwise he would not have had a child on his knee, wedged in under the steering wheel. Still another child, standing on the laps of children on the back seat, had a strangle hold on the man and so much hugging had tilted the silk hat at a very rakish angle. Above the rattle of the ancient Ford could be heard a gay song, in which all passengers joined. The children sang in high treble, the man at the wheel in a pleasant bass and far back from under the load on the back seat issued a strong contralto that

guided and held the song into place. The two dogs barked, obligingly endeavoring to help out the roundelay. The song they sang was French, something about *une bergere qui gardez ses mouton.* The caged canaries piped shrilly, but whether they also sang of a shepherdess who tended her sheep nobody knew.

Close behind the Ford was a truck, laden with household goods and towing an old street car. A colored man was driving the truck. A boy of about twelve stood proudly at the wheel of the street car, ready to put on brakes when necessary. The Ford came to a halt in front of the vacant house next to Miss Minerva's. The truck drew up a little behind the Ford, which of necessity placed the trolley car in front of Miss Minerva's side yard.

"I will not have it! I will not have it!" exclaimed that lady, but what she would not have nobody asked. Everybody was too busy watching the unloading of the automobile. How could so many creatures come out of one car? When the rattling stopped, the singing also stopped. Then was heard clamoring, squealing and laughter as children, dogs and canaries tumbled out of the vehicle. The most precious of the passengers, a huge terrapin, was lifted out by an earnest-looking little girl with short black hair and big grey eyes.

"Here, my darling Geraldine," she said, "here is your new home. I hope you will be very happy here. It is a place just made for turtles."

CHAPTER II

SIMPLE ARITHMETIC

ISS MINERVA looked around as though for a pleasant spot on which she might faint, but the Major had left his place in the sun and had gone to join the boys, who were now on the sidewalk curiously examining the towed street car. After all, fainting was no way out of this calamity and ordinarily Miss Minerva was not given to such weaknesses. She decided to buckle on her armor of indignation and join the rest of her family and the neighbors, who were flocking from far and near.

The man with the beard raised his silk hat courteously and bowed to Miss Minerva, taking in with a generous

sweep all the persons who had gathered around his belongings. The Major returned the greeting heartily but Miss Minerva stiffened a little more than usual and met the pleasant advance with a stony glare and a sniff that was almost a snort. The man with the beard merely grinned happily and turned to the negro driver of the truck:

"Here, Sambo, help me with this big gate. We can open it and you can drive the truck right up to the house. Mind the brakes, Number Six, so the trolley won't bump into the truck."

Billy and Jimmy sprang forward to help with the gate, which was off its hinges and must be lifted over weeds and blackberry briars.

"Fine! Thank you, boys! Now, Sambo, drive through and get close to the house, but for the love of Mike don't

knock it down. Careful—careful, Number Six."

Number Six turned out to be the boy who was at the wheel of the street car. Proudly he stood at his post and proudly put on the brakes in time to keep from bumping the household goods. Sambo drove up in style to the door of the little house, shouted Whoa! to his motor, as though it were a mule, turned off the switch and alighted.

"Whar to, boss?"

"Right there, Sambo. Now we'll unload and get settled before dark. I'll help you with the heavy things. Let the street car stay where it is—under this fine ash tree. Come on, Number Seven, and tell Sambo where to put your household goods."

Number Seven was the owner of the contralto voice, a girl of fourteen. She

could not extricate herself from the back seat of the Ford until she was unpacked, layer on layer of goods and chattels taken from her by the busy children, Numbers One, Two, Three, Four and Five. She was a delightful appearing girl, slender and agile, with a small curly head held very high and a countenance that simply radiated happiness but at the same time had an expression that made one instinctively know that she was the commander-in-chief of this expedition. Her word was law to the children. At her quick orders to do this and that they jumped to her bidding like so many trained soldiers.

"Coming, Pops!" she called in answer to the bearded man's request. "Tell Sambo to carry the kitchen things to the porch. They are all packed in the back. I gotta get the seats unscrewed

in the car so's we can get the male cots put up. I bet anything the screw driver's lost."

"Of course it is! What are screw drivers for but to get lost? The last time I saw it Number Three was cracking ice with it."

Number Three was a chubby little boy with wild sandy hair, freckled face and a turned-up nose, but the eyes were the eyes of an angel, wide open and innocent, and of a heavenly blue. He stood in front of Number Seven and opened his eyes very wide and looked even more innocent than an angel, all the time smiling the snaggle-toothed smile of eight years old.

"Well, Number Three, where is it?" demanded the girl.

"I—I—I put it back in the tool box, I most reckon."

"You most reckon! Now, Number Three, just for that I'm gonter call you Wallace. In the first place you shouldn't have cracked ice with it, in the second place you should have put it back, and in the third place if you didn't put it back you shouldn't have most reckoned you did. Now maybe we can't get the seats unscrewed and all of you male creatures will have to sleep scrooched up on street car seats or drape yourselves over the backs. How will you like that, Wallace?"

"I'm sorry 'bout it if you don't call me Wallace, but if you call me that I'm glad I did all the things I oughtn'ter done an' I am a thinkin' about callin' you Jean besides."

Jean, alias Number Seven, laughed. "Well, perhaps we can find it somewhere. In the meantime we'll all get

busy and be just as good as we can be. Remember, the laziest one will have to plant the gourd seed to grow up over the street car."

Then it was that Billy Hill came forward with his best bow and asked the girl if he might not be of some assistance in the way of unscrewing screws. Jimmy Garner made his next best bow, not the one he used at dancing school, and declared he was the best unscrewer there was. Both boys ran home for screw drivers and soon were hard at work removing the seats from the erstwhile street car and preparing that public conveyance for a male dormitory.

In the meantime Josephine had made friends with Number Four, the little black-haired girl who had the fascinating pet turtle named Geraldine. Josephine, her father often said, could probe

the deepest secrets from anyone and it took her only a short time to find out more about the family that had moved in next door than that family knew about itself. The bearded man, called "Pops," was the real father of Six and Seven and the adopted father of the other five. Six's name was Jack and Seven's name was Jean. A girl, Number Four, was Five's twin and Five was the black-haired boy who might have to plant the gourd seed because he always wanted to do the head work and tell the other people what to do. Pops said he was no doubt a good 'zecutive' but time would tell. It seems that if gourd seeds are planted by a lazy person they will grow faster than if an energetic person puts them in the ground. Four's name was Susan and her twin's name was Silas.

"I think Susan's such a terrible name, and that's the reason I call my turtle Geraldine," she explained to Josephine.

Four and Five were ten, which sounded like bad arithmetic to Josephine, who couldn't help thinking how nice it must have been the year before when they were nine and they could say Four and Five are nine.

Number Three bore the hated name of Wallace. Two was a sweet little girl of six who, in trying to help, got in everybody's way. Her name was Patty. Number One was a boy and a bouncing one. He was four and when they didn't call him Number One they called him Punkin. Susan couldn't remember what his real name was but she thought it might be Peter or Paul.

"Pops didn't have Patty an' Punkin until last year an' he didn't mean to

have them then. They kinder got wished on him but we are all of us glad they came because they are good little kids—that is, good enough. If they were too good Pops says he'd be uneasy about them."

"Who's the mamma of all of you?" questioned Josephine.

"Pooh! We don't have any mammas. Silas and I used to have a daddy—long time ago. We just can 'member him. He was real nice an' he kinder 'dopted Number Three, that is Wallace. When our Daddy died, or something, along came Pops an' 'dopted the lot of us. Then Wallace was Number One an' I was Number Two an' Silas was Number Three an' Jack (he's the big boy what's been driving the street car) was Number Four, an' Jean was Number Five. Then along came these last two an' all the

bunch of us moved up two an' Punkin an' Patty got to be One and Two."

"Isn't it very confusing?"

"You bet it is, but Pops says it's a good way to teach us mathematics. He calls it arithmetical progression."

"Wouldn't it have been easier if he had called the oldest one Number One an' then when he gets ready to have more children he needn't change the names of all the old ones?" asked Josephine.

"It does seem that way to outsiders, but Pops got a reason of his own. In the first place he says Holy Scripture says 'The last shall be first and the first shall be last.' Pops is a great man to quote Scripture when it helps out. Then he says that nothing broadens persons like change. He says travel is the best thing for broadening, but if you can't travel all the time it's a good thing

every now an' then to change your name."

"Is he in dead earnest?"

"You never can tell. Our Pops is the jokingest man I ever knew. He jokes about everything in the world except painting. Somehow he never jokes about that."

"Painting?"

"Yes, Pops is a painter."

"Will he paint the street car?"

"I guess not. I believe it isn't picturesque enough for him to paint it, but he's gonter grow a gourd vine on it an' maybe then it might be."

"I never heard before of a street car being a sleeping car," said Josephine.

"Pops has, but even if he hadn't he'd a thought of it. He is a great hand to think up different things. He just bought this street car yesterday. We

were passing through a town an' he heard the people were all riding in busses an' the street car company was busted an' the mules were most all of them dead an' decided he could buy one cheap—I mean a street car cheap, not a dead mule."

"Did he?"

"Did he! Why, they pretty near gave it to him for hauling it away."

"Gee, I wish we had a street car!" sighed Josephine.

Susan looked wonderingly at her new found friend. Could it be that she really would rather live in a discarded street car than in the pleasant home on the other side of the hedge? Of course, if the lady with the hard, straight back was her mother perhaps it would be better to be a 'dopted orphan, but then the lady might not be so very bad, after all.

Precious Geraldine, the turtle, had a hard back but surely her interior was very soft and sweet. Perhaps Josephine's mother wasn't so hard inside.

While Josephine was finding out so many interesting things about the new neighbors, she was also busily engaged in assisting them to settle. Number Four was assigned the task of unpacking dishes and Josephine was in her element while helping at this task. While thus employed it was easy to extract more information from the compliant Susan.

The bearded man was called Pops by all the children, but his real name was Mr. Richard Price. He had been living in New York but had decided that it was not the place to raise such a large family. He remembered the little home he had inherited from an old uncle some-

where down in Tennessee, the place that could not be sold because there was some mix-up in the title. He forthwith determined to pull up stakes in New York and move his family, legitimate and adopted, down to what he was pleased to call his ancestral acres. This was somewhat of an exaggeration, since the place comprised barely an acre, but perhaps a painter must be permitted certain latitudes in the field of imagination.

Back in his dim, youthful days, Richard Price remembered having visited this old uncle, who was really a great-uncle. He had always carried a picture of the place in his memory. He knew just where the trees were and how the two elms in front seemed to reach out their branches like loving arms to embrace each other. He remembered the

ash tree beside the little house, but it had been a small ash tree in old days and now it was a huge one with a great strong trunk that stretched way up in the sky as high as the ancient elms, and long graceful limbs that spread protectingly over the little old house and had now taken under their friendly shade the discarded street car.

How tiny the house was! He had remembered it as small but what had seemed small to a little boy was actually diminutive to the grown man. It was nothing but a doll house. Thank God for the old street car! was his heartfelt grace. Never mind, he'd buy another one for the girls! The house was not so small on the inside as it was on the outside, as is the way with some houses. There was not an inch of waste space, one room opening into another without

hall or passage, and the two rooms in the gabled roof were reached by ladder steps that came boldly down into the kitchen. There was a living room across the front of the house and behind that two small rooms, one a kitchen and the other a bedroom, all of them built around a triangular chimney. The biggest thing about the house was the chimney. The fireplace in the living room was quite large enough for a baronial hall, so large in fact that little Patty, Number Two, thought it was an extra bedroom and asked that her cot should be set up in it. Another thing that made the house seem little on the outside and big on the inside was the fact that there were so many large windows. There was also a back porch that was almost as big as the house. What with the big chimney and big windows

and big porch there seemed to be no house at all.

Number Seven was everywhere at once. Nothing escaped her watchful eyes. She must tell Sambo where to set up the kerosene cook stove; she must tell Pops where the refrigerator should go. All furniture, except the beds, must be left on the back porch until the house could be cleaned. The beds, of course, must be put up immediately, because people have to sleep.

"It isn't to say a very dirty house," she smiled at Pops. "It might have been cleaner but I've seen dirtier. It kinder smells clean. I think it's a sweet little house, Pops, and I believe we are going to be very happy here. In fact, I know we are."

"Such a dear you are, Jean," and Richard Price dropped his precious

artist's easel so that he might hug his even more precious daughter.

"Not such a dear as you are, Pops—but let's don't adopt any more children for a while."

"No more ever—so help me!" and he held up his right hand solemnly.

"I'm glad we've got what we've got, but we've got a plenty. Now you'd best send Jack down to the ten cent store and get a half a dozen small adjustable fly screens for the street car windows. The boys might get all bit up sleeping out there without screens. Tell Jack the Five and Ten is right across the street from the real estate agent's office where we stopped for the key to the house."

The street car seats were all unscrewed. Billy and Jimmy had lifted them out and at Jean's direction placed

them under the trees to serve as garden benches. Billy jumped the hedge and sneaked Aunt Cindy's broom from behind the kitchen door and with more vigor than skill swept the dust from the car. Then the cots, four of them for the four boys, were put up in the street car, now converted into a sleeping car, and Number Four and Number Three were ordered to make them up. Number Six returned with the fly screens, which fitted in neatly.

"Now, Number Five, plant the gourd seeds," jeered his twin. "The sooner the better, so's the car'll get covered with green vines."

"Well, perhaps I'd better," said Number Five. "It takes plain gumption to plant seeds right and when gumption is needed, I'm it."

CHAPTER III

MILITANT MISS MINERVA

AJOR ESTES wanted very much to ask the new neighbors to supper that first night of their settling, but Miss Minerva was not at all in favor of sudden company. She did not object to entertaining at intervals, but hospitality according to the traditions of the Old South was to her mind almost immoral. Pot luck was bad luck according to Miss Minerva. She wished neither to give it nor to receive it. When they had guests she insisted upon due warning so that a fresh cloth and the second best, if not the very best, china might be put on the table.

"'Tain't as if she didn't have the very

bes' eatin's day in an' day out," said Aunt Cindy. "Presidents an' preachers mought step in on us any day in the week, ter say nothin' er Sundays, an' what my folks air eatin' will be jes' as good as what they'd git anywhere in Tennessee. But Miss Minerva's got a funny streak in her 'bout sudden company. She don't wanter entertain no angels unawares. She wants ter know all about they comin' some days befo' han'. I reckon she done live by herself so long that she done got outer hospital ways. Now the Major is all fer company, drop in, fixed fer, 'vited an' not 'vited, jes' so's it's company."

The Major wanted to ask the new neighbors, but knowing how it would flustrate his Minerva, he contented himself with a sly suggestion to Aunt Cindy that she send Decimus Ultimus over

with a present of the pan of hot gingerbread that he had smelt baking.

"It is nice to be neighborly, isn't it, Cindy?"

"Sho' it is! An' what's mo', it is our duty. But I mus' say, Major, they's a passel er folks moved in nex' do'. I only hopes they ain't gonter turn out ter be borrowers like them Petersons what use' ter live there. Givin' is givin' an' borrowin' is borrowin'. I'd ruther ter give a pan er gingerbread than lend a spoonful er ginger."

Billy and Jimmy and Josephine were so fascinated by the new neighbors that they could hardly tear themselves away to eat. Supper bells were ringing in every direction but they pretended not to hear. They even ignored the delectable odor of hot bread baking, beefsteaks broiling and tomatoes frying. It was

more fun to convert old street cars into sleeping cars and unpack cracked china than just to eat, no matter how favorite the odors indicated those suppers were. Suppers were eaten every night and had been for untold years and no doubt would be eaten regularly for generations to come, but never before and perhaps never again would such interesting and original persons move in next door.

Miss Minerva and the Major were seated at the table. The Major was smiling genially, thinking of the hot gingerbread and how glad the children next door would be; Miss Minerva not smiling at all but looking severely at the empty chairs on each side of the table.

"Where are Billy and Josephine?" she asked Aunt Cindy, who entered the dining room with a plate of hot biscuits. "And Decimus—where is she? She

must wait on the table now that I have purchased caps and aprons for her."

"They's all on the way," said Aunt Cindy. "Billy an' Josephime air a scratchin' through the hidge right now an' Deci'll bring in the nex' batch er biscuit."

Aunt Cindy had no idea of divulging to her mistress that Deci had gone next door with the plate of hot gingerbread. Of course, while the Major's word was law and it was at his instigation that the gingerbread had been sent, it was just as well to say nothing to Miss Minerva about his generosity—at least for the time being. "When things leak out, slow like, they don't make near sich a mess as when they bus' out all at oncet," she was wont to declare.

In came Billy and Josephine, both of them somewhat tousled and grimy

from their recent occupations. Billy had a great snag in the knee of his next best trousers and Josephine had packing straw sticking out in all directions from her mop of curls. Down the front of her new dimity dress ran splashes of blood from a finger cut received while unpacking some broken glass.

"Oh, oh!" exclaimed Minerva, holding up her hands in holy horror. "Look at your hair! Look at your dress!"

"I can't see my hair an', Minerva dear, I am mighty sorry about my dress but Number Seven says it will wash out."

"I am afraid not. It is cherry stain, isn't it?" severely.

"No'm—bl—oo—d!" Josephine made the blood very long and gory sounding and held up the cut finger, which had been neatly bandaged by Jean.

"Oh, my dear child!" The mother was all solicitation, forgetting all about torn clothes, tousled heads and stained dresses in her anxiety about her darling. "I must disinfect the wound immediately."

"Not a bit of use, Minerva dearest. It's all been did an' don't hurt a mite. Number Seven keeps things handy for cuts an' bruises. She's been a doctorin' all the six every time any of them get hurt an' she ain't ever lost a single patient yet."

"Gee, I'm hungry!" broke in Billy. "I tell you, Jimmy and I have been working to beat the band. Maje, we unscrewed all the seats in the old street car and carried out all the benches and swept out the car and put up the cots and fitted in the fly screens. They certainly are great, those Prices—at

least some of them are named Price and some of them are named other things."

"It is strange how cheerfully you work for strangers and how difficult it is to get a thing out of you at home," said Aunt Minerva, severe again now that she realized her darling Josephine would not die of blood poisoning.

"Yessum!" said Billy, buttering three biscuits at one time.

"It seems a hard thing that just as Aunt Cindy and I had trained Wilkes Booth Lincoln to be a fairly good servant and he was of some use to us, doing small jobs around the place, he should have left and gone in that ridiculous and far from moral business of motion picture acting."

Billy and the Major exchanged glances as much as to say that the wife and aunt had started again. It had al-

ways been as wormwood to Miss Minerva that a good dining room servant and yard boy had been wasted in what she was sure would turn out to be a very poor actor. When letters came from the absent Wilkes Booth Lincoln, modestly recounting his small successes and with the news of a raise in salary, his former mistress would merely sniff disdainfully.

"What is it you want done, my dear?" asked the Major.

"The walks raked, the garden weeded, a coat of paint on the screens, the cellar whitewashed, the chimneys cleaned and stuffed, the grass cut, the hedge clipped, the—"

"Whew!" exclaimed Billy. "No wonder Nicky went in the movies! I'll cut the hedge for you to-morrow, Aunt Minerva."

"To-morrow is Sunday," she severely reminded him.

"Sure—then Monday."

"Billy, please cut the hedge between us an' the new people real low," Josephine begged. "I wanter see over there an' talk to them all the time when I'm not over there with them."

"On the contrary, you need not trim that portion of the hedge at all," declared Miss Minerva. "I wish it to grow as high as possible. I have no desire to have my privacy invaded. They seem to me to be most objectionable neighbors."

"Why, my dear, they seem very pleasant," said the Major. "Not at all objectionable."

"I consider them impossible," insisted Miss Minerva.

"Improbable, perhaps," laughed her

genial husband, "but not impossible."

"The idea of persons daring to come into this respectable neighborhood, carting along an old mule car with the avowed intention of living in it! What are we coming to?"

"Well, I wish we were comin' to live in a street car," pouted Josephine. "I'm tired of livin' in a ol' house just like ever' body else. I wish we could 'dopt a whole bunch of children an' number 'em 'stead of namin' 'em. Don't you reckon we could, Daddy?"

"Could what? Live in a street car or adopt a large family of children, so numerous that names can't be found?"

"'Dopt the family first an' then get the street car later on. If we 'dopted enough family we'd haveter get the street car the way Pops done."

Miss Minerva sighed heavily.

"Josephine! I do not know who Pops is, but whoever he is you must not say he done, but he did."

"All right, Minerva dear, but done sounds to me much more like he's 'dopted the family for ever an' ever. Did sounds like they useter be 'dopted but maybe ain't any more."

Miss Minerva sighed again.

"Not ain't, but aren't! You see, Joseph, already our daughter is speaking more incorrectly than usual. Evil communications corrupt good manners. No doubt those wretched persons who are moving in next door do not know good English when they hear it."

"Perhaps Josephine will be able to teach them, then," suggested the Major, his eyes twinkling.

"They don't haveter know English," declared Josephine, "'cause they know

French—leastways they can sing in French. I asked Number Four—that's Susan only she don't like her name an' asked me always to call her Four—anyhow I asked her what they were all a singin' when they came rattling up like a circus parade an' she said it was a French song that Pops taught them."

"Something disgraceful, I haven't a doubt!" sniffed Miss Minerva.

"No'm, it wasn't. It was just about a little girl tendin' her sheep an' a cat came along an' she told him not to put his nose in the cheese an' he put his nose an' his paws in too an' she up an' hit him with her shepherdess's crook an' kilt him dead."

During this conversation Billy said nothing but attended solemnly and assiduously to the business of eating. He felt it in the air that his Aunt Min-

erva was giving battle against the interesting newcomers and if too much was said in praise of them she might decide that all visiting should cease. If he maintained a discreet silence, that indomitable woman might forget the whole matter and turn her energies in another direction. If Josephine would only hold her tongue! Now Decimus Ultimus must open her mouth and put her foot in it, too!

Miss Minerva had smelt gingerbread cooking as she sat on the porch hemming tea towels and thinking how happy and peaceful everything was in her life. That was only a few hours ago but it seemed much longer since the peace had been rudely broken into by the clatter and bang of laden Fords and empty street cars. The peace and quiet was past now but Miss Minerva still

fancied she smelt gingerbread. She accordingly demanded a piece.

"Deci, tell Aunt Cindy to send in a plate of gingerbread. I should like some with my strawberries and I am sure the Major and Billy and Josephine would like some."

"'Tain't no mo'." announced Deci.

"No more? Absurd! I am sure Aunt Cindy was baking gingerbread."

"Yassum—but 'tain't no mo'."

"Did she burn it?"

"No'm, but 'tain't no mo'. The gemman say thank you m'am an'—"

"The gentleman?"

"Yassum. He say he done forgot how good folks kin be b'low the Mason Jar line. If you could a seed the way them white chilluns pounced on that there platter er hot gingerbread you'd a bin glad Aunt Cindy sont the whole

bakin' stid er half—the way she 'lowed at fust she would do whin the Major come out an' give his orders."

"Ahem!" The Major cleared his throat.

"Joseph!"

"Yes, my dear. I told Aunt Cindy to send it over to our new neighbors. I was sure it would be the thing that you would do as soon as you thought of it."

"Of course you would, my dear, dear Minerva!" cried Josephine. "You are all the time kind an' good to whole lots of little orphans an' half orphans what have numbers for names an' sleep in ol' street cars. I'd rather have a mother like you than even sleep in street cars—but I'd certainly like to sleep just once in one of them."

Miss Minerva was somewhat taken aback. Her Joseph and her Josephine

were certainly disarming. She could not pursue the subject of gingerbread, but she made a mental reservation that strange outlandish persons with beards and promiscuous families could not settle in her neighborhood and take possession of her family without something being done about it. Their town was an old-fashioned town, and their immediate neighborhood a conservative one. To her knowledge, nobody had ever come to that town with a pointed beard and a flowing tie and a strangely shaped beaver hat; nobody had ever come with a ready-made family with numbers instead of names and all of them singing, and what is more, singing in French. Certainly nobody had ever come dragging an old mule car which was to be converted into sleeping quarters.

"Humph!" said Miss Minerva, and gathering up her voluminous skirts, which she still wore long enough to be gathered up although the whole world was wearing short skirts, she sailed down the steps, down the front walk and out onto the sidewalk. Miss Minerva was doing something she seldom did and never approved of. She was making informal front porch calls.

First she called on Mrs. Garner, Jimmy's mother. Mrs. Garner had a society bee in her bonnet, with the result that it was an easy matter to convince that pretty little lady that the new neighbors were undesirable acquaintances and that Jimmy must not be encouraged in an intimacy that seemed already to be budding.

"I'll tell his father to tell him," Mrs. Garner murmured. That was the easi-

est way to control Jimmy, now that he had outgrown correction by hair brush or slipper. "You are quite right, dear Miss Minerva. Our children must not associate with the hoi polloi. One can't begin too soon to make them understand social distinctions."

Then the caller crossed the street and was fortunate to find Mrs. Black sitting on Mrs. Hamilton's porch. The case was stated to them with added force. Mrs. Black was not so sure about the undesirability of the newcomers. It seemed Frances had come in with quite a glowing description of their charms. Mrs. Hamilton, however, was all for controlling the situation by forbidding any visiting with the seven children who had settled in their neighborhood.

"It is bad enough to have been forced to put up with that common Tom Col-

lins, who seems to think now that he is as good as my Lina," said Mrs. Hamilton. "Sometimes I believe he even thinks he is better than she is."

"Frances thinks Tom Collins is a very remarkable youth," ventured Mrs. Black.

"These persons who have moved in next to me may be remarkable too," said Miss Minerva, "but they are not desirable and not to be encouraged. I am hoping for the cooperation of my old friends and neighbors in the stand I intend to take with my nephew and my daughter. If we are all of one mind it will be easier to control the situation." So saying, Miss Minerva stood up and collected her skirts in preparation for a dignified departure.

When Miss Minerva took on that platform manner and talked about co-

operation, there was nothing for Mrs. Black to do but agree and promise to see to it that Frances did not make friends with undesirables. Mrs. Hamilton knew Lina would not care to know such people. With the situation well in hand, General Minerva marched home, happy in having engaged in a preliminary skirmish and confident of future battles to be won. She could afford to look with less hostility and even with pity on the tiny house next door. The uncurtained windows of the living room showed candle light and three persons evidently unpacking books, the bearded man and his two children, Jean and Jack. From the street car came smothered whispers and then a child's voice:

"Cheese it, fellas! Pops said we must go to sleep."

Then from the open window of the

tiny house there floated out in delightful harmony of contralto, bass and treble:

"Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise him all creatures here below—"

CHAPTER IV

MINERVA SETS HER FOOT DOWN

LL unconscious of the neighborhood boycott that had been put on them, Richard Price and the seven children, three cats, two dogs, two canaries and one terrapin, gleefully started in on the business of living in the funny little house and the broken-down old street car. They had been many days on the journey from New York and now that they had arrived at their destination their inclination was to take life easy, but there was too much to do to allow of much laziness.

"Everybody must hop to it," said Jean as she served the oatmeal porridge. "There's more to do than enough—

work for everybody. Jack, you'd better get in the Ford and go find us a milkman. Tell him two gallons every morning—everybody in this family has got to drink a quart of milk a day, except Pops and me. We'll just drink a pint and the rest of ours can go for cooking."

"How about the cats?" asked Patty.

"Oh, Number Two is sure to want to feed the cats," laughed Jean. "I guess we can pinch off a teensy bit from each one of you to feed the cats. Here, Number One, take another help of oatmeal. You must eat until your tummy touches the table."

"What must we do—Five and I?" asked little Susan.

"You make up the beds in the house and Five and Three make up the ones in the street car. Jack, take One and Two with you and while you are about it find

us an iceman and buy a bushel of potatoes and a peck of onions. And get four loaves of bread, six cans of tomatoes, two pounds of stewing lamb, a big box of oatmeal and six pounds of rice. Find out what's the price of bananas—"

"Oh goody! Nannies!" cried Punkin.

"Nannies if they don't cost too much. Strawberries I know will be cheap here this time of the year. Get four quarts and I'll make a shortcake and have enough left for breakfast."

Richard Price smoked his after-breakfast pipe and smiled at his big girl. What a manager she was! Was there another girl of fourteen in all the world who could take care of a ready-made family as she did? Plenty of well cooked nourishing food right on the dot, every child eating his porridge and drinking his milk without a question! Sometimes

Silas balked at porridge and occasionally Punkin didn't want his milk, but there were always dogs and cats to feed and nothing went to waste. If a child didn't want what was served at one meal a little wholesome starvation wouldn't hurt him and he was sure to eat at the next one. No babying and catering to peculiar tastes could be put up with in that household.

"Now, children, every last one of you wash his own bowl and spoon and mug. Dry them and put them on the shelf in the kitchen. Never mind, Pops, I'll do yours because you've got to jump in today and make a living for the family."

Pops sighed heavily.

"I bid to wash Pops's dishes," cried Susan, Number Four.

"It's my turn," objected Wallace, Number Three.

"Pleathe let me do the thpoon," begged Punkin, Number One.

"Divide up," arbitrated Number Seven. "One, you wash the spoon, Three, you do the bowl and Four can wash the coffee cup. Now mind, all of you, and get them clean and shiny."

"Muth I blow on the thpoon tho it'll thine pretty?"

"Never mind that," laughed Pops. "Now all of you clear out and don't get into any mischief while Seven and I make a living."

"If we hurry with the beds can't Three and Five and I go with Six?" asked Susan.

"Surely you can, but remember when I'm not along Six is the boss and you must all mind. Pops can't stand children that don't mind."

Again the stillness of Miss Minerva's

street was rudely broken by the rattle-banging of the dilapidated Ford and the gay, cheerful laughing and singing of the six youngsters as they rode away in quest of icemen, milkmen, potatoes, onions, bread, tomatoes, stewing lamb, oatmeal and rice.

"Outrageous!" exclaimed Miss Minerva, peering from her bedroom window. "Perfectly outrageous!"

The Major did not know what was outrageous; he was snatching an extra little morning nap, so he sleepily agreed with his wife that something was certainly outrageous and dropped back into his dream.

Billy and Josephine were down on the front porch, waiting for Aunt Cindy to call them to breakfast, when the new neighbors drove noisily past.

"Gee, Billy, ain't they got fun?"

sighed Josephine. "It looks to me like they have the most fun of any children I ever knew. I wish I'd been born a orphan—anyhow a half orphan. I don't mean I am tired of my mother an' my daddy," she added hastily when Billy raised his eyebrows in a way he had acquired since he tried to act in the movies, "I just mean I wish there had been two of me an' one of me coulder been allowed to sleep in street cars an' ride around in old bunged up cars."

"Well, Jo, I reckon we might just as well forget it—I mean forget all the good times we kind of thought we were going to have with our new neighbors. Aunt Minerva has put her foot down. She isn't going to allow us to see the people next door."

"Not really, Billy! You're making up."

"No, I'm not. She told me last night after you'd gone to bed. She pronounced the ultimatum."

"Well, she pronounced a mighty big word, so big I don't know what it means an' I don't want to know. All I know is she hasn't told me I mustn't see my dear, dear friends an' I'm gonter run right now an' say howdy to them before Aunt Cindy gets the waffle irons hot. Mr. Price an' Number Seven weren't in the car an' I can slip over an' see them."

"But, Jo, Aunt Minerva—"

"Never mind about Minerva! She told you but she ain't said any kind of a tomatum to me an' until she tells me not to I'm gonter an' after she says not to I'm gonter put my mind on it an' work around her some way or other."

In a twinkling Josephine was through the gap in the hedge made by Sam

Lamb when he used to go for the cow—the same cow whose grazing ground had been taken away. The thought passed through the little girl's mind: could her mother resent the ousting of the cow?

Billy laughed when Josephine left him so precipitately. Billy usually laughed at Josephine. She was such an impulsive, amusing kid. There was Jimmy on his porch, no doubt waiting for Sarah Jane to call him to breakfast.

"Hi, Jimmy!"

"Hi, yourself!"

The boys met at the dividing fence.

"Say, Jimmy, guess what Aunt Minerva's done."

"You guess what my mother's done an' I reckon I can guess what Miss Minerva's done. Ain't it the limit! Just when we were going to have some good

times. Old people are all the time putting in their lips about new neighbors. My mother says they are queer folks an' won't move in our circle. Circle much!

I'm tired of running around in a circle like a squirrel in a cage or a calf tied to a post. Those folks have been places an' know things, those Prices. Ain't

the girl a winner, Billy? She's the up-an'-comingest kid I know. She makes that little old Doris an' Linanfrances seem like stick-in-the muds."

"I never saw Frances do much sticking in the mud."

"P'raps not—but Frances is so full of herself she'd float outer the mud like a balloon. But now this girl—this Jean—she understands folks an' hasn't any foolishness about her."

"You sound to me like you got it bad," laughed Billy.

"Yes," gloomily, "I reckon I've got it bad, but I hope you ain't gonter get it too, Billy. You're all the time gettin' it bad when I do."

"You're safe as far as I'm concerned, you poor nut!" declared Billy scornfully. "I like older women—so much more intellectual."

"Well, I reckon there's no use in my making a fool of myself when my mother won't even let me go see the Prices. I gotta mind my mother an' father until I'm financially independent. Then you can just watch me how I'll boss myself."

"I reckon I'll haveter mind Aunt Minerva no matter how independent I get," sighed Billy. "I'm kinder beholden to her for adopting me."

"That's what you call no blest o'bilge," explained Jimmy. "Praise be, there's our breakfast bell! I ain't so far gone I can't eat."

"There's ours too," and Billy cheered up. "But I wish Jo had got back. Aunt Minerva's sure to raise Cain."

Miss Minerva was seated at the head of the table. She seemed to be surrounded by an aura of solemnity. Even

the advent of Decimus Ultimus, bearing a plate of buttered waffles stacked in a neat pile and smelling as only waffles can smell, did not take from her countenance a certain austere piety, although her nostrils involuntarily quivered with the odor that assailed them.

"Where is Josephine?" she demanded as soon as the Major had asked the short, fervent blessing.

"I'll call her," suggested Billy.

"I did not say call her—I asked where is she," and Miss Minerva poured her husband's coffee with an expression that the rich color and aroma of that beverage did not warrant.

Billy did not answer. A slow tide of crimson began at the nape of his neck and gradually suffused his face. Billy was a poor person to trust where con-

cealment was necessary, and was absolutely no good at lying. Why hadn't that naughty Josephine come home? Why did she leave it to him to explain her absence from that breakfast table?

"Where is she?" demanded her mother.

"I'll go call her," repeated Billy.

Here the Major stepped in the breach.

"All right, son, go call her," he said firmly.

"Couldn't she hear the bell?" asked Miss Minerva, but Billy was up and away at the suggestion from the quick-thinking Major.

A shrill whistle over the hedge and an OO—AA—HOO, OO—AA—HOO brought Josephine in a hurry.

"Quick, Jo, Aunt Minerva's on the warpath," he hissed.

The child's eyes were shining and her

curls bobbing up and down in excitement.

"Oh, Billy! I'm so sorry for One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six and Seven, to say nothing of poor Mr. Price—Pops."

"Well, don't stop and tell me about it now. Just keep a running. Waffles and honey are waiting and Aunt Minerva's looking like the wrath of God."

Josephine kissed her mother with one of those light snowflake kisses, the kind that melt away before you know they are there. Then she hugged her father, cuddling a moment in his comforting arms and resting for a split second on his capacious waistcoat. Then she slid into her seat and assumed an expression of babyish innocence.

The Major beamed at her over his glasses and her mother allowed her ex-

pression to soften for a moment as she looked at her darling. In spite of her all-enduring, never-ending love for Josephine, Miss Minerva felt the child must be admonished, first for being late to a meal and second for having called on questionable neighbors before breakfast and on the Sabbath.

"Josephine, I forbid you to associate with those extremely disagreeable rowdies who have moved next door. Don't interrupt me!" she raised a warning finger which she wagged ominously. "They are noisy and ungodly. The Sabbath stillness was rudely interrupted by them on this, their first day in their new home, when one would feel that if they had any instinct of decency they would at least endeavor to appear respectable—"

"Assume a virtue if they have it

not," giggled Billy, but his aunt turned her wagging finger in his direction and continued:

"I consider it a disgrace to live next door to persons who drive out on Sunday morning, a whole load of young children in a very dirty and noisy car, all of them singing at the top of their lungs. If they don't consider the Lord they should at least consider their neighbors."

"Kin I interrupt now?" begged Josephine. "I got something mighty important to say."

"What is it? But you need not think I will give in about your associating with those horrid, noisy persons."

"What I got to say is sad, very sad." Josephine made her mouth tremble and refused the hot waffles which Decimus Ultimus was passing.

"Proceed!" said Miss Minerva, sternly.

"It's sad, very sad—leastways Number Seven is all broke up about it. Number Seven is Jean an' she's the really, truly daughter of her father—that is, Pops. Pops don't mind so much about it. He says it'll come out in the wash an' maybe they'll find it somewhere. But Jean thinks it is gone for good an' they'll never find it. An' she says the worst of it is they don't know which one they've lost, what with there bein' seven of them in all."

"Seven what? Seven children?" cried the horrified Miss Minerva. "You mean they have lost one of the children and don't know which one? I knew they were barbarians! Now, Joseph," she said, looking exultantly at her husband, "perhaps you will uphold me in my con-

clusion to have nothing whatever to do with them."

The Major merely said "Ahem!" and begged his little daughter to continue her tale of woe.

"I never said children, Minerva, never once. I was a tryin' to tell you that while our dear, sweet, lovely, new neighbors, what I love an' love—while they were a travelin' down here to live right next to us, all packed in a Ford car an' their belongings all spillin' outer a truck an' campin' by the wayside an' stoppin' to buy street cars to sleep in, all the time a lovin' each other an' adoptin' little helpless chilluns, an' feedin' cats an' dogs an' turtles an' canary birds—somehow, 'thout ever missin' it or knowin' what time they did it or what city they left it in, or maybe not a city at all but maybe in the country when

they camped at a farm house or by a river—somehow they lost—"

"Lost what?" cried Billy. "The suspense is too great, Jo. Tell us what they lost."

"They lost a day."

The Major and Billy exploded with laughter. Deci ran back in the kitchen with a plate of unpassed waffles so that she might laugh her fill. Aunt Cindy, who had been listening through a crack in the pantry door, sank in a chair to enjoy the deep abdominal chuckles that traveled through her bulk like waves traveling across the surface of a deep pond.

Miss Minerva laughed a little but not much. If she laughed too much Josephine would feel that she had the upper hand. The child did not laugh, but looked sadly from one to the other of

her family. Billy and the Major knew that behind that preternatural solemnity was a merriment that was merely biding its time and would finally out.

"It isn't anything funny! It's awfully solemn to lose a whole day when we haven't but just so many. Any of us might die to-morrow. But what makes poor Number Seven, Jean this is, feel so terribly bad is that she didn't know it was Sunday an' she sent all the children out with Number Six to buy provisions an' hunt a milkman an' a iceman. She didn't even make Five an' Three an' One wash extra behind their ears. That's something she always makes 'em do come Sunday besides the big tubbin' on Saturday. She says she just gave 'em oatmeal porrige for breakfast, which ain't to say much for Sunday mornin' when they usually have pancakes. An'

the saddest part of all is that there ain't anything for them to eat for dinner 'ceptin' what she can scrape out of a can. I tell you, Seven is all broke up about that day she lost."

"Poor child!" said the Major.

Miss Minerva pursed her lips and remarked acidly:

"Persons should not be so careless of their days."

CHAPTER V

SEVEN HUNGRY PRICES

HE children had come back from the quest for provisions much more quietly than they had gone forth. Jack had driven confidently down Main Street to do the shopping for his sister, only to find every place of business closed, with the exception of drug stores and automobile service stations.

"Gee, this is a sleepy town!" Jack had exclaimed. "Ten o'clock and nothing opened yet. Even the Five and Ten is closed."

"Looks like the churches are all opened," said little Susan. "I wonder what they are opened for—funerals or weddings or something?"

"Jiminy crickets, kids, it's Sunday!" cried Jack. "The joke's on Seven."

"Joke's on us, too," laughed Five, as he poked his twin sister in the ribs. "Nothin' to eat an' no place to buy it!"

Jack turned the car around and, awed into silence at the prospect of a foodless Sunday, crept quietly back home.

Punkin's lower lip was poking out ominously. The little fellow did not often weep but when he did he wept so loud and long that there was no standing it. A storm of coming tears was always presaged by a trembling and protruding lower lip.

"Now, Punkin, stop it—stop it!" commanded Patty. "You know it's bad to holler an' cry on Sunday. Whatcher cryin' about anyhow, you big boob?"

"I ain't a cryin' yet but I'm gonter

cry about New York. I wisht we were up in New York!" His lip stuck out more and more.

"Aw, New York ain't no place to live," said Wallace. "I've lived all around an' New York ain't no place to live. What's it got to make you cry for it?"

"It's got delicate intestines where you kin buy things on Sunday," wailed Punkin and then the flood gates were opened and poor Number One wept and wept for the delicatessen shops of New York.

All the way home he wept and through his sobs one could hear "Perlony!" "Poke rolls!" "Frankfutters!" "Taty salid!"

When they arrived at home the presence of Josephine somewhat lessened his violent grief. Indeed, for the last

few blocks of the ride his howls had subsided into gulps and sobs, but tears were still flowing like forty days and forty nights.

"Punkin, there's comp'ny," whispered Patty. "Mustn't cry before comp'ny. Pops will be ashamed an' you'll make him cry too."

Josephine's amusement and amazement were intense when she saw Mr. Price take out a large handkerchief and begin to sob loudly, indeed so loudly that Punkin's weeping was a mild spring rain compared to Pops' noisy demonstration of grief. The father's cries gave the cue to the others and in a moment the whole family pretended to weep until Punkin felt he must cease and comfort the others. Then Mr. Price uncovered a laughing countenance and peace and quiet were restored.

"And where are the provisions?" demanded Jean.

"It's Sunday an' nothin's doin' in the way of eats," said Jack. Then Jean almost wept in earnest. She sank on a chair and groaned miserably. Then Number One decided that sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander, for since he was not allowed to cry, Number Seven must not be permitted to groan; whereupon he sank to the floor and emitted groan after groan in exact imitation of Jean's distress. Then everybody laughed and Jean caught the little fellow to her, hugged him, and told him he was a dear boy.

"But Oh me, Oh my!" she wailed afresh. "I'm worried enough over not having the proper Sunday dinner for my family, but more than that I'm sick over losing a precious day."

The children looked very solemn.

"Do you s'pose it's lost for good?" asked Number Three. "Maybe we kin look for it an' find it somewhere."

"Maybe we can, but think of all the other things: big baths and ear washings and pancakes for breakfast. I was planning to send the whole bunch of you to Sunday school, too, the first Sunday we spent in our new home. I thought it would give tone to the family—wouldn't it, Pops?"

"Sure, but they can go next Sunday."

"But next Sunday isn't quite the same. It would have made such a good impression if they could have started to-day."

"Well, I'm rather glad it's Sunday," declared the father, "because even you won't make me work on Sunday." One of the perennial jokes between Mr.

Price and Jean was that she was a cruel taskmistress and made him work whether he wanted to or not.

"You might start in on those Bible story illustrations in color you said you had an order for," suggested Jean. "It wouldn't be a sin to draw Moses in the bulrushes on Sunday. I'll pose for Pharaoh's daughter and Punkin can be the infant Moses."

"I don't waner be the infant Moses," whimpered Punkin, who was still a bit tearful. "I waner be the bull rushes an' stick Moses with my horns."

"All right, son, you can be the Bull of Bashan raised from the Golden Calf, if you like; anything just so you don't bawl any more to-day."

"This is all very fine," broke in Jack, "but for Pete's sake what are we gonter eat? I'm hungry already."

Josephine had listened in big-eyed amazement to the conversation. The idea of a family's being hungry, actually hungry, with no chance of buying provisions, was a new one to the child. She determined to tell Aunt Cindy and see if something could not be done about it.

At that moment she heard Billy's shrill whistle and bidding the delightful family a hasty adieu she ran home.

"What a lovely little girl!" Pops remarked as Josephine departed.

"I think she's great!" said Five and Four in chorus.

"I'd like to paint her," said Pops, making an imaginary drawing in the air and waving his fingers in such a manner that the children understood it was Josephine's hair that he was endeavoring to reproduce. "Such hair! It's a regular halo. And her mouth certainly

has a great deal of character for a rosebud."

"She can be the Infant Samuel stider me," suggested Silas, magnanimously. "Bible boys always looked like girls with long hair an' angel sleeves."

Mr. Price utilized his many children as models for his illustrations. Posing for Pops was a form of service in which all of them delighted, although at times it meant fatigue and self-denial. But Pops was Pops, and it was an honor to be allowed to help him. The illustrations for the stories from the Bible, his latest order, had caused much talk and conjecture among the youngsters. Fortunately, there were characters enough to go around and nobody need be slighted. Jean, because of her lovely face and slender form, was to be cast for many parts, both male and female. Poor

Jean had many things to do besides pose for the artist, but she was always cheerfully acquiescent when called on to perform this service for her beloved father. She would undertake the whale that swallowed Jonah and enact it with as much dramatic force as Salome dancing before Herod, or Ruth in tears amid the alien corn. Jack, a snub-nosed, freckled, American boy, would perhaps not be called on often for the Bible pictures although he had figured on many a magazine cover designed by his father.

But now the business of feeding eight persons from a much depleted larder was the problem in hand. Jean thought of the miracles in the Bible and wished she had been born in those days of loaves and fishes.

"Well, I reckon faith can still help out," she sighed. "But then, I'll tackle

it somehow and fill these kids up if it has to be on hot water instead of soup."

Diligent search among the boxes and barrels still unpacked revealed a can of baked beans, one of tomato soup, four potatoes, a sprouting onion, a box of minute tapioca and a ham bone which had been destined for the dogs but was salvaged in time by the distracted little mother.

"Why, we can have a feast!" she declared. "Can you find anything else, Number Four?"

"Here's that ol' cabbage without no head the man cheated you on in Memphis an' we been saving for the canaries. An' here's that bag of cornmeal we got at the mill where we stopped to camp that time in Kentucky. Here's some dreffully sour buttermilk too.

"Hoorah!" shouted Pops excitedly.

"Cabbage and cornmeal and buttermilk! At last I can make an ash cake! Been wanting to do it all my life and never been allowed to. Now it's a necessity. We'll build a fire out under the ash tree and when it gets just right we'll cook our ash cakes."

"Do you haveter make ash cakes under ash trees?" asked Wallace.

"Sure," said Pops, "at least we do. Put on your soup, Jean darling, and the boys and I will get busy with the camp fire and have the ash cakes ready by the time your soup is cooked. Put in plenty of water because by dinner time we're going to need a lot of filling up. Not too big a fire, boys, and as far from the house as you can get. And for Pete's sake don't burn up our precious street car."

In a twinkling all was bustle and fun.

That was the way Pops and Jean always acted when the outlook was gloomy. Jean scoured the great iron pot, the one saved for camping, and by the time the boys got the fire well started all the ingredients were in the pot with the exception of the tapioca, and that was put to soak to be added to the soup fifteen minutes before serving.

"It'll make it thick and nourishing, that tapioca, but why they call it minute tapioca when it has to cook fifteen minutes is beyond me," declared Jean as she peeled the last potato and took up the lone sprouting onion which was scheduled to be next to go in the soup.

"I'm mighty sorry we gotta eat that onion," sighed Patty. "I been watching it sprout ever since way back in Pennsylvania and I been kinder plannin'

to keep it for a pet. I was gonter plant it an' watch it have a lotta little baby onions."

Patty was comforted by the promise of a real flower bed with roses, pansies, and anything else she fancied. She watched her pet onion peeled and sliced, even the green sprouts cut into tiny pieces and popped in the pot. She shed a tiny tear but stoutly declared it was not sorrow but "jes' the onion" that did it.

Now the soup was boiling and Pops must make the ash cake.

"To think I am finally doing it," he cried happily. "All my life I've wanted to make one, and now my fondest hopes are being fulfilled."

The children gathered around him while he mixed his meal and buttermilk and soda and bacon drippings carefully

saved by the frugal Jean on the journey from New York.

"Now stir it well but keep it stiff so that you can mould it with your hands. An ash cake is not an ash cake unless you can see the finger prints. I know all you kiddies are dying to help, but gee, children! I'm a selfish pig but I just have to do this myself. Think how long I've wanted to!" He had in reality looked at the grimy, if eager, little hands and decided to do all the moulding himself with his long artistic fingers imprinted on each cake.

"Now wrap each one in a cabbage leaf—just so, and put them down in the hot ashes and rake the coals over them. And there we are all set for a dinner fit for a king."

"While we are waiting for dinner to cook, let's try and find that day we

lost," suggested Jean. "I'm going to worry about it until we find it."

"Good! That'll be a great game!" cried Number Five as he sat by his twin sister, Number Four. They were in the shade of the beautiful ash tree, not close enough to be disturbed by the heat from the fire but near enough to watch the soup boiling in the great iron pot and smell the mingled odors of ham bone and onion, baked beans and tomato soup, steaming cabbage leaves with their precious pats of cornmeal carefully wrapped in their protecting greenness and lusciousness.

CHAPTER VI

THE LOST DAY

T was a pious town. On Sunday morning all the world went to church, that is all the grown-up world. The young people went either to Sunday school or to church or to both. Billy and Josephine had gone to Sunday school and had begged off from church. The strictly religious mother and aunt had given in to their pleas because she knew the sermon was to be one for raising funds for foreign missions and not likely to be interesting to youth. So while the new neighbors were delightfully engaged in cooking out-of-doors, Billy and Josephine were solemnly seated on the front porch of their

home, longing to join the charmed circle so busily engaged in trying to find the lost day, mislaid somewhere between New York and Tennessee.

Miss Minerva, in the earlier days of her guardianship of Billy, had endeavored to control and direct his reading but the boy had soon gone far beyond her. He was an avaricious reader and she only read from a sense of duty or with the full intention of improving her mind. Billy read everything he could get hold of, no matter what the subject or who the author. The printed word was almost sacred to Billy. Josephine followed close in his footsteps. Both of the young people were encouraged in their literary pursuits by the Major, who considered a love for reading better than a university education. He owned a fine old library and was con-

stantly adding to it, although his devoted wife considered the buying of new books a foolish extravagance unless one had read every word of the old ones.

One rule Miss Minerva stuck to through thick and thin: no fiction on Sunday. They could read history, biography, or poetry, but no fiction. Books of travel were not tabooed so Billy was enjoying himself hugely over Mark Twain's "Following the Equator," while Josephine had her pretty little nose buried in Tennyson's "Idyls of the King."

"I reckon if Aunt Minerva knew how funny this book was she'd think I ought not to read it on Sunday," said Billy as he shook with laughter over some absurdity of the great humorist.

"An' I reckon if she knew how much kissin' an' huggin' there is in this poetry

book she'd say I couldn't even read it on Monday," giggled Josephine. "Do you know, Billy, I pretty near love my mother to death but I wouldn't love her a bit less if she'd come around a little sooner an' not make us work so hard to fool her."

"Fool her?" questioned Billy. "Who's fooling her?"

"You an' me an' Daddy an' Aunt Cindy—all of us. She fools herself lots of times, too. She's foolin' herself about these new people—I mean Mr. Price an' One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six, Seven. She is making herself believe that she hates 'em all an' she's gonter keep us from seein' 'em for quite a while, but she's gonter come a floppin' in the end—if they stay here long enough. Of course she might be so stiff-backed they might pick up an' leave before she

can limber up. It usually takes her a lotta time to unbend."

"She's been calling and said her say to the neighbors," gloomed Billy. "Somehow that wasn't quite like her."

"No, that was because of the gingerbread. If Daddy hader come to her an' got her to send it she wouldn'ter been so brisk."

Billy looked at Josephine admiringly. "Gee, Jo, you've got lots of sense!"

Josephine blushed with pleasure and resumed her reading about Enid and Guerrant. Again Billy set sail with the inimitable Mark. From the kitchen came sounds and smells of Sunday dinner under preparation. It was easy to distinguish roast duck amid the smells, and the sound of the ice cream freezer, as Deci turned the complaining crank, arose above the rattle of Aunt Cindy's

pots and pans and her brisk stirring of something or other.

"Ain't it awful, Billy, to think of our nice new friends being hungry an' sad?"

"They may be hungry, but they're not so sad," declared Billy as he peered through the clematis vine that covered one end of Miss Minerva's porch. "Look, Jo, the fire is burning up high and there goes Jack with a big, black pot! Look, they're going to cook their Sunday dinner out-of-doors! Gee, I wonder what's in the pot?"

"I reckon love's in the pot," sighed Jo, sentimentally. "Now that sounds like poetry."

Billy smiled, and chatted:

"'When hungry will it reach the spot,
When Love, sweet love, is in the pot?'

"Really and truly I'd just as soon as not they had my dinner," he declared, "but

Aunt Minerva wouldn't let us give it to them."

"Even Aunt Cindy's got her back up," complained Josephine. "She said real good white folks never get so low in provisions, an' she has her doubts about a white man that adopts children he don't haveter. She said colored people are all the time adopting but white folks ain't called onter. I went out an' begged her to slip me just enough food to keep them going until to-morrow, but she wouldn't listen an' she told Deci she'd do terrible things to her if she sneaked 'em for me."

"I feel something awful about it all," groaned Billy. "Aunt Minerva's laid down the law so hard that I can't help any either. I reckon they won't want us to help if we can't be friendly with them. They must be thinking already

that we are snooty. I tell you, Josephine, Christian women can be awfully hard. Aunt Minerva's about as Christiany a woman as you'd find and Aunt Cindy is another, yet here they let a whole family of interesting people starve at their very door."

"It don't smell much like starving," Josephine commented as the mixed odors from the black soup pot were wafted on the breezes. "Maybe we needn't worry so much, Billy."

"Maybe not," sighed Billy, "but I do wish Maje hadn't been so backward in coming forward."

"Me too! Poor Jean, losing a day an' all! Maybe she'll find the day," murmured Josephine, once more deep in the romance of Tennyson's poetry.

"Maybe so, but even if she does, won't she still be a day behind in eats?"

suggested Billy with a grin. "Or will she be a day ahead and not be hungry if she has already eaten more days than she can account for? Confusing business!"

The young people read on in silence. Billy began to laugh. "Gee, Jo, just listen to this. I'm gonter copy this out and manage somehow or other to get it over to Jean Price. Mark Twain says: 'To-morrow we shall be close to the center of the globe—the 180th degree of west longitude and 180th degree of east longitude. And then we must drop out a day—lose a day out of our lives, a day never to be found again. We shall all die one day earlier than from the beginning of time we were foreordained to die. We shall be a day behindhand all through eternity. We shall always be saying to the other angels, "Fine day to-day,"

and they will be always retorting, "But it isn't to-day, it's to-morrow." We shall be in a state of confusion all the time and never know what true happi-

ness is. Next day. Sure enough, it has happened. Yesterday it was September 8; to-day, per the bulletin-board at the head of the companionway, it is

September 10, Tuesday. There is something uncanny about it, and uncomfortable, in fact, nearly unthinkable and wholly unrealizable, when one comes to consider it. Along about the moment that we were crossing the Great Meridian a child was born in the steerage, and now there is no way to tell which day it was born on. The nurse thinks it was Sunday, the surgeon thinks it was Tuesday.'"

Billy chuckled. "Don't you think Jean and her father would laugh over that?"

"Sure they would! I'll get a pencil an' you copy it, Billy."

When the Major and Miss Minerva came home from church they found Billy and Josephine seated so peacefully behind the clematis vine that they never dreamed of the turmoil and rebellion

stirring in their hearts. Billy was busily engaged in writing. Miss Minerva, who still hoped he might develop into an eminent divine, fondly imagined he might even be writing a sermon on that peaceful sabbath morning.

It was all copied out in Billy's best style, every I dotted, every T crossed, every semicolon where it belonged, every comma and period just as it was in the book. Mark Twain himself could not have done it any better, thought the fond Josephine.

"Now sign it, Billy."

"But I didn't write it! Jean might think I'm trying to steal it if I put my name to it. I'll just sign Mark Twain. Anyhow, Aunt Minerva told us we mustn't play around with the Prices, so maybe I'd best kinder be anonymous right now."

"How you gonter get it over to Number Seven?"

"Fold it like an airplane and let the wind do the rest."

Richard Price and his family of seven were seated under the ash tree waiting for the camp fire to cook the improvised dinner. Occasionally Jean would stir the soup, but the ash cake must be left in the coals until the green cabbage leaves were burnt quite black and the red ash had burnt itself out and turned grey.

"The important thing about ash cake is not to disturb it until it is quite done," announced Mr. Price.

In the meantime everybody was trying to find the lost day. They spoke of it as "Jean's day." Even little Punkin was wrinkling his brows and doing what he called, "Finkin'".

"Let's begin at the beginning," suggested Pops. "Now we certainly left New York on Tuesday."

"Why, Pops! You are carelesser with days than Number Seven," cried Susan. "You know we left New York on Thursday."

"To be sure we did, but we meant to leave on Tuesday. If we counted up from the day we meant to leave maybe we could find that naughty little day that is hiding from us. Maybe it is that Wednesday between the day we meant to leave and the day we left that is making all the trouble."

"Well, whatever day we left New York," put in Jack, "we certainly spent Sunday in Richmond, Virginia."

"We certainly did, Number Six," agreed Silas. "I remember that just as well as anything because we went to

church at St. John's where Patrick Henry said 'Gimme liberty or gimme death'."

"An' that's where Sambo took me'n Patty to see his great-grandmother what was mos' two hundred years ol'," cried Punkin. "Leas'ways she was mor'n a hundred an' that's mos' two hundred."

"Her name was Aunt Kizzie an' she had all her fractions but only one tooth," Patty remembered.

"She means faculties," suggested Jean.

"She was the oldest person I ever saw," declared Patty, "an' she was all dried up like a prune. I asked Sambo if they soaked his great-grandmammy would she smooth out like a prune an' he laughed an' hollered an' told his great-grandmammy an' she was proud I said

it an' didn't mind a bit. Sambo says everything anybody says about his great-grandmammy just makes her prouder an' prouder. She is so proud about living so long that she wants her folks to charge people to see her."

Pops laughed. "Well, it is established without doubt that we were in Richmond, Virginia, on a certain Sunday. What else did we see in that delightful city?"

There was a chorus of George Washingtons, Robert E. Lees, Jefferson Davises, Confederate Museums, Poe shrines, and lovely flower gardens.

"Now when did we leave Richmond?" Pops asked while Jean stirred the soup and gave a surreptitious poke at an ash cake that looked as though it might be getting burnt enough on its covering to be brown of crust.

"Tuesday!"

"No—Wednesday!"

"It must have been Wednesday. How could we have seen all those sights on Monday? We must have had Tuesday too to see all the statues of all the generals and all the Confederate flags besides old colored mammies going on two hundred and the place where Libby Prison used to be and where John Smith landed when he came a sailing up the James River and the house where Poe's mother died and the Old Stone House where all the things about Poe were kept," declared Jack, out of breath from reciting the list of treasures found in Richmond.

"Of course it was Wednesday," agreed Jean. "Don't all of you remember we got to Charlottesville that evening and all the churches were open and all the

people singing because it was prayer meeting night? Everybody knows prayer meeting night is always on Wednesday."

And so the game proceeded while the soup bubbled and thickened and the ash cakes browned to a pleasant crispy crust or the cabbage leaf wrappers burned themselves away. With much discussion and disagreement the happy family proceeded on its retrospective journey. There was much talk about whether something occurred on Thursday or Friday, Saturday or Sunday, and then someone was sure to recall some trifling incident that would establish the day of the week beyond a doubt and again they would pick up the thread of the journey and proceed on the way.

"Anyhow, we went to church every single Sunday until to-day," said Jean.

"Even if it hadn't been right to go it would have been a good thing so we could keep up with the days and weeks."

"Well, hold fast to Monday," commanded Pops, "because we must stop hunting for the lost day now and have dinner. That soup will burn in another minute and my ash cakes are done enough to serve angels unawares—if any should turn up."

Bowls and spoons were brought and everybody had a sycamore leaf for an ash cake plate. My, how good it tasted! Better than the proverbial stalled ox—far better! The soup was thick and rich and very tasty, with just the right seasoning. As for the ash cake—but of course whatever Pops did was perfect in the eyes of all his children. Surely such ash cake was never eaten; crisp on the outside and soft and creamy within.

"I don't care how many days we lose if we just have Pop-made ash cake," declared Number Five.

"Washed down with Jean-made soup," said the loyal Jack. What his Jean did was always the best.

"I still want to find the day," mused Jean as she nibbled her ash cake and looked dreamily up at the blue sky patterned between the leaves of the friendly tree.

A flutter like the sound of feeble wings and there landed in the girl's lap a paper folded like a tiny airship. On its wings were written "Open".

"Only look! A message out of the blue!" cried Jean.

"It says open, so open and see what it says," clamored Si and Susan.

Jean read aloud the extract from "Following the Equator" while Pops

and the children listened delightedly.

"And it's signed Mark Twain."

"So he went to Heaven in spite of himself," laughed Pops. "Went to Heaven and wrote you a message to comfort you about your lost day."

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" cried Jean. "I've found it! I've found it! The day, the great day! This little airplane from Heaven made me find it. Don't you remember, Pops, just after we got over the Kentucky line when we had to rest up for repairs and you and I were lying on that hillside looking up at the sky and we saw the mail plane floating by away up in the heavens and I said how peaceful everything was up there and how it must seem like Sunday all the time with no business going on, no bells ringing. And you said: 'Yes, and with no illustrations of the Infant Samuel.'

And we just lay there and dozed and talked and I got to thinking it was Sunday, although it was really Monday because all the people along the road had their wash hanging out. That's where my lost day is—just floating off in the blue sky."

Jean stood up and waved the paper with the message written on it and then she called out in clear and loud tones:

"I certainly thank you, Mark Twain, for helping me find my day!" but she did not look up into the sky from whence the message was supposed to have come, but she turned her sweet and candid gaze towards Miss Minerva's house. The clematis vine stirred visibly.

CHAPTER VII

PEOPLE OF QUALITY

AMBO owned the truck in which the household goods of the Prices traveled from New York to Tennessee. The kindly young colored man had not even known of the existence of Mr. Price and his large family until he was engaged by that gentleman to haul his furniture to the new old home, but on the leisurely trip south Sambo decided to adopt all of them from Pops to Punkin. By the time they reached Virginia they were his folks. They belonged to him and he belonged to them. When he entered into the contract of moving the artist to Tennessee he had no idea of remaining in that state, but had ex-

pected to pick up a load somewhere and return to New York. Sambo had never liked to stay long in any spot. He and his truck had what he called, "A itchin' tire to keep a movin'." But he found it pleasant in that sweet southern town where his white folks had decided to settle and he was of a mind to settle with them, for the time being at least. The truck was a secondhand one long before its present owner bought it "as is" at a sale, but Sambo had a genius for machinery and he loved his truck as a mother loves her baby or a boy his dog or a man his horse. He loved it and tended it with care and intelligence. He slept in it, and when it was not carrying a load he kept house in it, cooking in one corner and eating in another.

After depositing the Prices' furniture and doing what he could to bring order

out of chaos, Sambo had backed his truck out to the street and turned its nose instinctively towards the colored settlement on the outskirts of the town. A vacant lot sandwiched between two cottages invited him to park his beloved truck there. It was overgrown with scrub heaven trees and dog fennell but the powerful truck overrode the heaven trees and mashed down the fennell as ruthlessly as an army tank. The pungent odor of the bruised plants made Sambo sniff happily.

"Humph! Smells like home," he said as he shut off his engine and looked around.

"Meanin' to say New York?" asked a very large, moon-faced Negro, who was leaning over the side fence of his home, evidently very much interested in the new arrival, his truck, his New York

license, and his business generally. The curious one was our old friend Sam Lamb, grown a little fatter, a little blacker and a tiny bit grizzled with the years, but the same kindly, good-natured, easy-going person who had first welcomed William Green Hill when he had come, a homesick little stranger, to live with his Aunt Minerva.

"No, not meanin' to say New York," grinned Sambo. "New York is my abidin' place, but New York ain't nobody's home. They do say some folks was born in New York, but not me, man, not me! When I say home I mean Richmond, Virginia."

"Do tell!" exclaimed Sam Lamb.

By this time the fences on both sides of Sambo's parking place were black, brown, gingerbread and high yellow with eager colored onlookers. Little

children were peeping through the cracks and knot holes while the taller ones craned to see over the top and men and women peered eagerly to see the

strange license plate. Boys climbed up on the wheels of the truck to view Sambo's sleeping and housekeeping arrangements.

"I been to Richmond once," spoke up a dapper mulatto in a postman's uniform. "Went to the Elks' Convention. Richmond is a great place."

Sambo smiled happily.

"Sho' is. I ain't a Elk myself. Never was much of a jiner, so I didn't go to the big meetin' in Richmond. Where'd you stay when you was there?"

"St. Peter's street. Mighty nice folks there—treated me fine. There was the oldest ol' person I ever saw in that house. 'Way over a hundred an' spry as a cricket—"

"My great-grandmammy!" exclaimed Sambo, excitedly.

"No? If that don't beat all! Listen folks—"

The crowd gathered close about the truck while the postman Elk held forth on the subject of the old, old, old, old

lady and how fine they had treated him in Richmond at the Elks' Convention. In the twinkling of an eye Sambo was in society. Invitations poured in to make his home with black, brown, gingerbread and high yellow.

"I sleeps in my truck," said Sambo, affectionately patting his beloved, "but I's open for eats—wide open!"

"Then step right in here!" commanded Sam Lamb. "My ol' ooman is some ol'-fashioned fryer an' my nose is already done okayed onions with the liver."

Thus it was that Sambo became first a guest and then a table boarder at Sam Lamb's. Sam Lamb's house was small and his family large, but his wife had always managed to have a few table boarders and an occasional roomer as well, although the roomer must share

his room with several little Lambs. The traveled postman was for the time taking his meals with the Sam Lambs and that evening, over the liver and onions, the excellent light rolls and cream gravy, he and Sambo had much conversation concerning the delights of Richmond, Virginia, and the extreme spryness and general remarkableness of Sambo's great-grandmother.

"She can remember everything," boasted Sambo. "Why, that ol' lady can remember things that never even happened clearer than many a younger one can remember things that really did happen."

"She got out and marched with the Elks for three or fo' blocks when they paraded down Two Street. You oughter heard those Elks holler."

"'Tain't so long since she got read out

in meetin' for dancin', either," Sambo continued. "She said she wouldn't have jined so young if she hader known 'bout folks dancin' the Charleston an' then on top of that the Black Bottom. That ol' granny could get up an' shake her foot up to a year ago. She hadter give it up here lately but she sets in her cheer an' wiggles when a good chune comes along even now."

Sweet were the dreams of Sambo that night as he lay stretched out in his truck with the odor of bruised fennell in his nostrils, reminding him of his Virginia home, and his inner man so pleasantly full of Mrs. Sam Lamb's very good food. Morning found him happy and contented. Perhaps he would decide to make a long stay in this town. A satisfying breakfast, with more talk with the postman concerning Richmond and the

aged grandmother, made life even more desirable.

Sam Lamb came in late to breakfast.

"You mus' 'scuse me, honey," he said to his wife who was brandishing the battercake turner somewhat aggressively because of the delay and the griddle getting too hot and then too cold to bake the cakes to the proper brown. "It wa' that ol' cow of Miss Minerva. She wa' a bustin' with milk but wouldn't let down an' Miss Minerva won't listen to reason where milk is concerned. The bucket has gotta be jes' so full. If I wasn't the man I am some day I'd eke it out with some nice rich water from the pump."

"You was too late a-goin' to milk," said Mrs. Sam. "I reckon the po' cow got kinder peeved."

"'Twan't late for Sunday, honey."

"Critters don't know Sunday from Monday."

"Don't you believe it! 'Specially cows. Cows knows Sundays an' cows knows Christmas. They knows Christmas because the blessed Jesus was born in a cow stable—laid in a manger."

As is the case in all society, mention of scripture settled the argument. Mrs. Sam baked cakes in silence, turning them with a flip-flop that delighted Sambo.

"No," continued Sam Lamb, "that there cow was upset because of bein' turned out of her parsture. She don't take to bein' shut up in a stable all night this pretty May weather."

"Was that the cow what was browsin' round Mr. Price's domercile?" asked Sambo.

"The same! Miss Minerva's!"

"An' who is Miss Minerva?"

"Gawd, man! Miss Minerva is Miss Minerva. What's mo', Miss Minerva's cow is Miss Minerva's cow. They's both interconstitutions in this here town. Every now an' then the cow changes, but Miss Minerva is always the same. Other folks gits milk from waggins, but not Miss Minerva. I been a milkin' for Miss Minerva since I was a boy. Most times she parstures her cow in that lot next hers, even when somebody is a livin' in that little doll baby house. As a rule ain't nobody there, but even if they is Miss Minerva kin most ginerally make 'rangements. But I reckon this Mr. Price ain't gonter want no cow perusin' around his place, what with all them chilluns liable to git their little foots trod on."

"I reckon not," agreed Sambo. "I

reckon if Mr. Price 'lows a cow in his lot it'll be his own cow."

"Is you knowed Mr. Price long?" asked Sam Lamb.

"I knowed him an' his chilluns long enough to call 'em my white folks," declared Sambo, a bit aggressively, "and they's sho' 'nuf white folks, too."

"May-be, but I ain't ever seen sho' 'nuf white folks befo' livin' in a ol' street car."

"I reckon you ain't ever seed no folks of any sort livin' in a street car. In New York it's all the rage. Up there they calls it Rusty Katy. All the rich folks are buyin' up street cars—not that my white folks are rich—but they's mighty nifty. But even if it wasn't nifty to live in street cars I reckon a street car is liable to become all the go when my white folks take to livin' in one."

"Go 'long, man! Air they sho' 'nuf quality?" asked Sam Lamb.

"Sho' 'nuf quality? Sho' 'nuf quality? Man, they's the best ever! They's a little down on they luck for the present but liable to be back in the milyumaire class any day now—any day." His audience looked a little sceptical at this. Sam Lamb and the postman exchanged sly glances.

"I reckon I knows quality 'bout as well as any man, havin' been uster nothin' but," Sambo continued, "an' my great-grandmammy befo' me knows quality. When we passed through Richmond I took a passel of the children to call on her an' she 'lowed she never seed mo' signs of quality than those little children showed."

That settled the postman, who after all was not so interested in whether or

not Mr. Price and his large family were truly aristocrats, but if an old woman, who was more than a hundred years old and one who had been cheered by the Elks, considered them of the best, far be it from him to gainsay her or her great-grandson. Sam Lamb still had his doubts but perhaps it was best to humor the new boarder. If he thought his folks were of quality, all well and good. Of course, Miss Minerva thought otherwise and Miss Minerva was usually right. It was a nuisance to have to hunt pasture for the cow. Having her graze right next door was a great saving of steps for the portly Sam who, due to increasing weight, was not very energetic.

Mrs. Sam Lamb was in entire sympathy with the new boarder. Mrs. Sam often grew weary of her husband's conversation concerning the wisdom and

general rightness of Miss Minerva who, after all, was no wiser than the next and in this instance no doubt wrong. Word had come to the settlement of Miss Minerva's visits to the neighbors and the ultimatum that had been pronounced, forbidding the young people to make friends with the new neighbors.

"A sin an' a shame," she mumbled as she slid an extra pile of corn cakes on Sambo's emptied plate. Nobody had told Sambo of the taboo placed on his adopted family, so he was entirely in the dark about what was a sin and a shame. But he accepted the replenishment of his plate gratefully and fell to after deluging the pile with luscious, slow pouring sorghum.

CHAPTER VIII

DECI SPREADS THE NEWS

THAT afternoon, Deci, who was an inveterate visitor, came to call on the Sam Lambs. She was always welcome in the settlement because of the fund of news she brought with her. As soon as her erect, diminutive little figure was spied there was a chorus of greetings from the cabins.

"Hi there, Deci! What's the news?"

"Whatcher know, honey?"

"Anybody sick to your house?"

"Ol' Mr. Garber daid yit? We heard tell he wa' in extremibus."

The big ribbon bow on the end of Deci's wrapped plaits trembled with importance as the little girl bowed first on

one side, then on the other. She knew how to hold a stage.

"News a plenty!" she called out shrilly. "Know 'nough to fill a bucket. All's well to our home an' they do say ol' Mr. Garber's liable to live 'bout ninety days mo'. Mr. Hamilton done los' his spare tire an' they do say he cussed a plenty spite er bein' so hinpicked. Miss Pauline Pirtle done misplaced her year trumpet agin an' you kin hear the conversation at the Garners' as fer up as the railroad crossin' a tryin' to make Miss Pauline hear that it's a pretty day. Mrs. Maurice Richmond done had twinses—but twinses ain't no treat to me because of Postle Peter an' Pistle Paul what my Mammy had an' she sho' had a han'-ful." She paused for breath and was drawn into the house by Mrs. Lamb.

"Pleased to meet you! Pleased to

meet you!" she said in turn to the postman and Sambo, with an extra smile to the assembly consisting of many Lambs of all ages and several neighbors from the settlement. Deci had a way of bobbing a curtsy exactly in the manner of her grandmother, old Aunt Bluegum Tempy. Having bobbed some half dozen times, she perched herself on a chair in the middle of the crowded room and proceeded to tell everything she knew. She had a lively tongue and a quick, bird-like manner, turning her head from side to side, punctuating her sentences with little trills of infectious laughter. All the gossip of the town had in some way come to her sharp ears. Quickly and wittily she retailed it.

"Ol' Miss Carroll wo' her bracelet to meetin', the one Billy an' Jimmy found in the dump pile. 'Tain't a church

bracelet, but mo' like a partified one. They do say even Miss Minerva smiled in church when she seed ol' Miss Carroll crook her little finger a puttin' a dime in the collectium barsket an' a holdin' up traffic while she showed off her bracelet. Anybody would a thought she wa' puttin' in a dollar the way she crooked her little finger. Hi! Yi!" she cackled, and all the listeners joined in.

"Billy an' Jimmy air a talkin' 'bout goin' off to a soldier school nex' year. They ain't talkin' out loud about it, but they don't haveter talk out loud for Deci to hear. Hi! Yi!"

"She means a military school," the postman whispered to Sambo.

"I means what I says," snapped Deci, showing that whispering was useless where she was concerned. "I would a said a millinery school in the beginning

but I was feared you wouldn't know what I meant so I said soldier to make it easy for you. Yi! Yi!"

Then the child jumped to news of Wilkes Booth Lincoln and his success in motion pictures.

"I reckon he'll be in the class with Tom Chaplin an' Charley Mix befo' we know it," she boasted. "He make so much money that befo' long he'll be havin' all gol' teeth an' rollin' aroun' in a Royce ottermobile. My brother, Wilkes Booth Lincoln, ain't gonter stop at bein' jes' a star. He gonter be a moon—an' a full one at that. Ev'ry letter I gits from him money jes' rolls out of it. I haveter open the invelop over a basin so's to ketch the nickles an' dimes an' quarters that come a rollin' out. Sometimes they's gol' nickles an' dimes. That's the kind they have out there."

"I'd like to see one of them gold dimes," laughed Sambo.

"Well, here's one!" and Deci pulled from her pocket a watermelon pink handkerchief with a knot tied in one corner. She carefully undid the knot and out rolled a $2.50 gold piece. "There, mister! There's a gol' dime an' if you take it to the sto' you kin buy a sight of stuff with it—only you ain't gonter take it."

The piece was passed from hand to hand while Deci trilled a happy laugh.

"I 'low I'll soon be a jinin' my brother out in the Promised Land," she continued. "He ain't said come yit, but whin he says it I'm gonter pick up an' fly. An' whin I says fly I means fly kase the flyers air done come to our town an' they's ready to carry passemgers to the ten cornders of the yearth."

"Any more news?" grinned Sambo. "How about my folks what moved next do' to you-all?"

"Lawd! Ain't you hearn tell about yo' folks? They's been in plenty er trouble this day." Deci looked solemn and shook her wrapped plaits until the big pink bow trembled ominously. "If they's yo' folks you bes' be lookin' after them."

"What's the matter? They ain't sick or nothin', is they?"

"Not to say sick, but in a bad way. They done got mixed up in the weather somehow so they can't tell which a-day of the week it is. They done miscalculated an' thought Sunday was Saturday an' whin they tried to buy 'visions this morning they found all the sto's shet an' they ain't had a Gawd's mouth to eat this entire day."

"What?" cried Sambo. "My folks hongry an' me a settin' here stuffin'! Leave me go!"

"White folks hongry!" exclaimed Mrs. Sam Lamb. "An' quality folks at that. Whe'fo' Miss Minerva didn't put Sis Cindy to wuck an' feed em?"

"Miss Minerva done got her back up an' she won't 'low a pinch or a drap to leave her kitchen," said Deci mournfully.

"Whe'fo'?"

"She done took a notion, an' when Miss Minerva takes a notion, that's a end."

"Well here, clar the kitchen!" commanded Mrs. Sam Lamb. "I reckon what white folks won't do fer their own color, colored folks kin make out to do. Sambo, slice that ham an' slice it thin an' slice it voluminous. Here, Be-at-rice, wrop up this pan er rolls. You, Sam

Lamb, go down in the cellar an' git off'n the she'f a quart jar of peach pickle an' anudder of blackberry jam. Thank Gawd I done made a crock of tater salid

to eat on fer a supper snack an' I kin 'clude that in this here donatium."

Ten minutes after Deci had imparted the information concerning Sambo's

white folks being hungry and minus a day, Mrs. Sam Lamb had packed a large hamper with provisions of various kinds and Sambo had cranked up his truck and had started to the relief of the Prices. Deci was seated by the chauffeur, the basket of food between them. On her determined little face was an expression of extreme satisfaction. Had she not outwitted both Aunt Cindy and Miss Minerva and at the same time would not the feeding of the next door neighbors give great joy to the beloved Josephine?

Sambo's truck was not of the most silent. It rattled and banged, brakes grinding, and engine back-firing with the noise of twenty motor cycles. The Sunday afternoon naps of many citizens sleeping off Sunday dinners were broken into as the vehicle made its noisy

way through the streets of the quiet southern town. Deci sat proudly clutching the laden hamper, looking neither to the right nor the left but seeing everything. As they neared their destination she saw the Sunday papers slide from the countenances of Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Black as they were rudely awakened from their snoozes on their respective front porches. She saw the slender silken legs of Lina and Frances as they jumped from the hammocks where they had been seated entertaining their "dates", two callow youths scorned by Billy and Jimmy. She heard Lina call to Frances: "What's Decimus Ultimus doing on that truck?" She heard Frances answer: "Heaven knows—but what a racket!"

She saw Benny Dick scamper back to his mother's room in the Garners' back

yard to tell her to come quick and see who was riding on the front seat of the truck with the New York license. She saw Miss Minerva peeping through the blinds of the front bedroom to see who was desecrating the Sabbath by such an unseemly noise. She saw the Major sit up suddenly from his comfortable chair on the porch and the paper slide from his countenance as it had from Mr. Hamilton's and Mr. Black's. There was Aunt Cindy, dressed in her best black silk, and evidently starting on a sick visiting expedition. Every Sunday afternoon Aunt Cindy tended the sick or buried the dead. This was a duty she had taken up since she joined Sarah Jane's society, the T. S. & B. D's.

"Well look a yonder!" she gasped. "Deci, what you doin' dar?"

Deci heard not and heeded not. She

grasped the hamper with a more determined clutch and held her little head up as though the pink hair ribbon bows were a queen's crown.

Billy and Jimmy and Josephine were seated in the swing, deep in their Sunday reading; Billy still following the equator with Mark Twain and Josephine the fortunes of Arthur's Knights of the Round Table. Jimmy had read the comic supplement twice, the sports section three times and now was trying to work the crossword puzzle for the day.

"What's to salute with gums in five letters?"

"Gums?" asked Billy.

"Yes, gums. G-u-m-s, gums!"

"You can't salute with gums."

"Well you can, because here it is in print. Five letters, beginning with a s."

"Spits!" giggled Josephine.

Just then Sambo's truck came rattling by and the trio discovered the proud Deci seated by the grinning Sambo.

"Well for crying out loud!" said Billy.

"I pretty near knew Deci could do something about it," muttered Josephine as the truck stopped in front of the Prices'.

"Do what?" asked Billy.

"Look at the big basket she's carryin'," answered Josephine, mysteriously. "Deci's been a callin' down to the settlement. My mother ain't the onlies' person in this town what can go a callin'. There's no tellin' what Deci hasn't been tellin', but all the same Mrs. Sam Lamb has packed up food for our dear friends. They are our dear friends, I don't care how much our mothers an'

aunts won't let us go see 'em. Deci an' I kinder talked out what was the way to do it an' she's done it an' done it right."

They watched the neighbors, all eight of them, as they ran out to greet Sambo, who proudly tendered the laden hamper to Jean.

"Here, Miss Seben, the colored folks done hearn you didn't have no eats 'cause of gettin' mixed up 'bout Sunday an' they done tendered you a little gift of victuals."

"Oh, how wonderful!" cried Seven.

"We didn't know 'bout yo' mix-up until this little gal named Deci revulged it."

Deci sat very straight and looked very proud.

"My children and I hardly know how to thank you and your friends, Sambo," said Mr. Price, with a little choke in his

voice. "I had forgotten how kind people in the South could be."

"Gee! We gonna have supper too," exclaimed Jack.

"That soup was good but it didn't stick very tight to my ribs," said Silas.

"Now we won't have to cook Geraldine after all," Susan put in. Jack and Silas had been teasing the little girl by suggesting her pet must be cooked to feed the starving family. They had even gone so far as to hunt up a recipe for terrapin stew.

Billy and Jimmy and Josephine listened with all ears to the conversation and looked with all eyes as the great hamper was lifted from the seat of the truck and carried around to the kitchen door by Jack and Silas.

"It makes me feel funny way down in my tummy that my mother and Aunt

Cindy didn't send that picnic to our dear friends," said Josephine.

"You all time think your mother oughter do things," grumbled Jimmy. "I reckon my mother an' Sarah Jane oughter fix up a basket just as much as your mother an' Aunt Cindy. If you've got a feeling in your stomach I've got one clean through to my backbone that the white folks have been mighty backward in coming forward in this business. Ho, hum! I'm miserable. Well, I reckon I'll go on with my puzzle. What did you say saluting with your gums in five letters was, beginning with a S?"

"I said you couldn't salute with gums," laughed Billy.

"An' I said spits," said Josephine.

"You know well enough this paper wouldn't say spits," Jimmy replied.

"It never said it—I said it. Lemme see your ol' puzzle. Aw Jimmy, you can't read printin'. It ain't gums, it's guns."

"Then the word is salvo," suggested Billy. "That means shooting off guns in greeting. I wish we could give a salvo to the Prices to let 'em know we're glad they've got some eats."

"I've got some torpedoes left from Christmas," cried Jimmy. "I been savin' 'em for some kinder occasion an' I reckon this is it. Sunday or not, let's pop 'em on the bricks an' give a whoop so they'll know we are glad an' celebratin'."

The torpedoes were fine and dry and made a splendid noise which attracted the attention of all the neighborhood as well as the persons for whom the celebration was planned.

"Whoopee! Whoopee! Whoopee!" shouted the conspirators.

"Now we'd better duck or we'll get blamed," whispered Billy, and by the time the startled neighbors arrived the three were seated again in the swing, reading and working on the crossword puzzles.

"Yes," declared Jimmy, "salvo makes it all come out right. But tell me, Josephine, how are our friends to know we meant it all for them?"

"We can tell Deci an' Deci can tell Sam Lamb an' Sam Lamb can tell Sambo an' Sambo can tell Mr. Price."

That night Sam Lamb arrived at the Prices' back door with a can of foaming milk.

"I kinder thought you-all might be needin' milk with so many little chilluns around."

"Indeed we do," said Jean. "Perhaps you can furnish us regularly."

"No'm—not to say reglar, but jes' this oncet." Sam Lamb did not divulge that Miss Minerva's cow gave an extra amount that evening.

To his conscience he said:

"You know well enough, Nigger, that if one time I takes Miss Minerva extry milk she's gonter 'spect me an' the cow to keep it up. It's safter jes' to give that extry away. I wouldn't keep it fer myself or my fambly fer nothin'. Takin' from them what's got too much an' givin' it to them what needs ain't to say stealin'."

After all, that was the code of morals practiced by Robin Hood and many a hero of history and romance.

CHAPTER IX

WANTED—FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS

EVER did acquaintances seem so desirable to the young people as did the new neighbors. But the young people had been forbidden by their parents and guardians to visit them or be visited by them. Had Miss Minerva, Mrs. Garner, Mrs. Hamilton and Mrs. Black had the wisdom to keep hands off, doubtless the boys and girls would have found the strangers no more interesting than each other, once the novelty had worn off. Perhaps they would have come to the realization that they were just ordinary people who happened to be doing rather extraordinary things in that they were numbered instead of

being named and slept in an old street car instead of a house. Perhaps the parents and guardians would not have been so stern in regard to the newcomers if their sons and daughters and nephew had not been so eager to pursue the acquaintance and so sullen when balked in their desires.

Josephine's attitude could hardly be called sullen; it was merely persistent. She was very like her mother in some ways and was as determined to do certain things as Miss Minerva was determined that she should not. The usually cheerful, happy household was gloomy, and a sinister air of discontent cast its spell over the entire family. Josephine never let an opportunity pass to speak of the neighbors next door, praising them loudly for their virtues and even their faults.

"I reckon One and Two can get dirtier than any children I ever saw and can look cuter and sweeter when they are dirty than other children can look when clean," she declared. "I wish I'd been allowed to get as dirty as I could when I was little."

Mrs. Estes scented battle and couched her lance. "And why?"

"Because dirty children are happier than clean children. All I want is to be happy." Josephine allowed her lip to tremble perceptibly. That was a trick she had learned when she had a part in the movies.

Her mother's expression softened a little. After all, she wanted more than anything in the world that her little girl should be happy, but she was sure having her own way was not conducive to ultimate happiness, certainly not if it

was the wrong way. Miss Minerva was always quite sure that all ways were wrong that opposed her own especial way. Again and again she had been forced by circumstances to reverse her opinion since Billy had come to live with her and she had married the jolly old Major and Josephine had been added to her blessings. However, the habit of being right was still hers. She never doubted herself even when evidence was against her. In this case of the neighbors she was doubly sure she was right. Such persons as Richard Price and his ridiculous family were certainly not suitable companions for the impressionable Josephine and William Green Hill. Why, William Green Hill might even be the answer to her prayers—a minister of the Gospel. To be sure he gave no apparent sign of it as yet but one never

can tell. Of course, if her nephew should go into the ministry it would be his duty to endeavor to save the souls of the riff-raff, but hardly to associate with them. The Prices were riffraff, according to Miss Minerva. She knew nothing about them except what she saw, a crazy man who had adopted a lot of crazy children and was bringing them up in a seemingly crazy way.

She remembered quite well old Peter Price, the uncle who had once lived in the tiny house now occupied by his nephew and heir. Old Peter had been crazy too, according to Miss Minerva's way of thinking. He was a vegetarian, a grahamite (one who ate no white flour), a socialist and, it was whispered, a spiritualist. To be sure he was a gentleman born and bred, which was more than his nephew was. Gentlemen did

not wear loose, flowing ties; gentlemen did not travel around the country in disreputable Fords running over with children, dogs, turtles and canary birds, all of them singing, at least the children and the canary birds were singing, and the dogs were barking. The turtle was silent perforce, since turtles have no voice, although the Bible did say in one place: "The voice of the turtle is heard in the land". Perhaps, Miss Minerva concluded, in those days turtles had voices and could sing.

Miss Minerva was wont to think of the Bible days as sacred, though she could but congratulate herself that they were past if turtles sang. It was bad enough to live next door to turtles even though they were silent. Originally there had been but one turtle, Geraldine, but now there were many; not Geral-

dine's offspring, but a family she had adopted even as Richard Price had done. Everybody who found a turtle brought it to Susan. It seemed to be a good summer for turtles because now there were six—more or less. The number fluctuated by reason of the fact that they constantly got out of their pen and ran away—or rather crawled away. Only fancy turtles with voices! Turtles singing!

What if the turtles did not sing! All of Miss Minerva's other neighbors did, that is all of them who lived in the crazy house and the crazier street car. Even little Punkin could carry a tune without dropping it. Pops played on a guitar like a professional and Jean sawed out a wonderful accompaniment on a bass fiddle. Some persons would have considered their performance charming,

but not Miss Minerva. Music, according to that lady, was all very well in its place but that place was church and the music must be hymn tunes. Radio jazz was bad enough but the radio could at least be shut off. Fortunately, Billy and Jimmy and Josephine had wearied of the radio of late and poor Miss Minerva no longer had to put up with the terrible sounds issuing therefrom when static ruled the air with shrieks of the dead and dying—at least that was what Miss Minerva said it sounded like.

But there was no shutting off or out the noise from the new neighbors. Their laughter and singing penetrated even to the stern Minerva's bedroom. One couldn't keep windows shut in summer, and a very warm summer at that. To be sure, the Prices retired early—by nine o'clock everything was quiet—but

Miss Minerva contended that her undesirable neighbors made the night hideous and that her rest was broken by their caterwaulings, as she called the singing of the children and their Pops.

Summer evenings on the front porch had lost all of their former charm for Miss Minerva. Not only was this eternal singing ever ringing in her ears but it was plain to see that her beloved Major enjoyed it. Sometimes, when one of his favorites was rendered especially well, he would softly pat his hands together in silent applause. It was only deference for her unreasonable prejudices that kept him from clapping loudly and calling out for an encore.

"Lovely! Lovely!" he whispered as the last notes of "Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms" died softly on the summer air. "I really

think that is the most beautiful song in the world," he murmured.

Minerva also thought it was a beautiful song, in spite of its not being a hymn. Of course the tune was a hymn tune. However, the song being beautiful has nothing to do with its rendering by the Prices. She merely snorted.

Major Estes smiled sadly. It was not very kind of his Minerva to snort over that song about endearing young charms when she knew how he felt about the song and he had always thought she felt as he did. If he chose to think of his wife as having endearing young charms it was hardly tactful of her to snort or even sniff. On the other hand, Mrs. Estes was displeased that her husband should applaud, though ever so silently, the performance of persons whom she had made up her mind

to despise. The Major, poor man, had decided that discretion was the better part of valor and had been merely scrupulously polite to the next door neighbors without inviting intimacy or even friendship, although in his heart he was quite as interested in them as Billy and Josephine. He often thought how pleasant it would be to join in the singing (he had piped a pleasing tenor in his day) or how much he might enjoy a chat with Price, who was undoubtedly a man of wide experience and reading. But his Minerva had the bit in her teeth and must run until she was winded. In the meantime the Major sat on his own porch, smoking like a wet stump, as Aunt Cindy put it, a pensive expression on his old pink and white face as he listened to the music.

Josephine sat on the steps trying to

squeeze tears out of her tightly closed eyes, determined that could she get her eyelashes wet enough for a showing she would seize on that moment to kiss her mother. She heaved great sighs, hoping her parents would notice her unrest.

"What is the matter, little daughter?" asked the Major.

"Oh, nothin'."

"Something must be," he insisted, sensing that Josephine was anxious to air a grievance.

"Well, I was just a wishin' I was colored—or anyhow not such a terrible respectable white. It ain't any fun to be so respectably white."

"Why?"

"If I was colored I could go down to the street where Sam Lamb lives an' tell 'em the news; an' if people told me I

couldn't go out of nights I could go anyhow 'cause I'd be so nice an' black you couldn't see me in the dark."

"Tell what news?"

"Well, I reckon the news that I was black would be news enough, wouldn't it?"

The Major laughed and acquiesced.

"But why would you like to be not so respectably white?"

"'Cause then I could go a visitin' other folks that some say are not respectable."

"Josephine, bed time!" Miss Minerva's voice was sharp and commanding.

The little girl got up quickly from her seat on the bottom step of the porch. She must move quickly or the tear that she had just managed to squeeze out might dry before she could rub it on her mother's cheek as she gave the good night kiss. It proved not quite so wet and big as she had hoped for, but it served to make her stern parent unhappy, which was all that the child had been working for.

Miss Minerva was unhappy, but she had no idea of relenting. She blamed Josephine's tears entirely on the new

neighbors. Everybody had been happy until they came.

"I wish their horrid little house would burn down," she mused, and then took herself to task for such an unchristian thought, especially since no doubt if the house did burn down Price would simply buy several more old street cars and go on being her neighbor.

Nine o'clock! The last notes of the song sounded like "the drowsy peep of half awakened birds".

"All hands to bed!" commanded Pops. "You are so sleepy you can hardly sit up. Look! Poor little Punkin is already in the Land of Nod. Here, Jack, pick him up and put him to bed. Skin him out of his clothes and into his pajamas. Needn't make him wash his feet to-night."

"Now Pops!" objected Jean.

The nightly foot washing rite for the barefooted children was one thing Jean insisted upon. She declared sheets got too dirty unless feet were washed, and Pops insisted that all the fun of going barefooted was nullified if a boy must be all the time washing his feet before going to bed. A friendly, bantering argument between Jean and Mr. Price was an almost nightly occurrence.

"Oh, Jean, he's so sleepy. Look, his little feet are not really dirty."

"Oh, no! No dirtier than potatoes just dug up out of the ground! In fact, Punkin and Wallace both smell like new potatoes all the time."

"Please, Jean. Don't make him wash his feet to-night," Pops pleaded passionately. "Don't make any of them. I can remember being made to wash my feet when I was sleepy more clearly and

more sadly than any punishment that I had as a boy."

"All right, Pops," smiled Jean. "After all, I don't wash the sheets and you have to pay to have them done."

Thus Pops won out and the barefooted boys did not have to stand up in basins of cold water, rubbing one foot on top of the other in a vain endeavor to get them clean without touching them with their hands, as is the way with sleepy boys the world over who must wash their feet before retiring.

That night the sleepy prayers that were wafted up from the old street car were filled with fervent blessings for Pops and Jean: Pops for having such an understanding heart where boys were concerned and Jean for being so reasonable. Four pair of dusty feet were thrust between the cot sheets and four

boys slept the happy, peaceful sleep of the care free.

All of the children safely asleep—even the guitar in its box and the bass fiddle wrapped in its leathern jerkin—and now Jean and her father were at ease to indulge in their nightly chat before they too must retire, a long and busy day behind them and another one before them.

"Almost finished the Bible illustrations," remarked Pops between long-drawn pulls at his pipe.

"Good! How about Baalam?"

"He's coming along fine. I had to draw the ass from memory, or rather from imagination. You see, I never saw or heard an ass utter words. I am afraid I made it look a little like our esteemed neighbor, Mrs. Estes, in the face. Somehow, when you think of an ass speaking

you have to give it a kind of human expression. I give you my word I did not mean to make it look like this poor lady next door but a likeness crept in and it is there to stay."

Jean giggled and then sobered.

"What makes her hate us so, Pops?"

"What makes you think she hates us?"

"I don't think, I know. That funny little colored girl, Deci, told Susan that Miss Minerva not only wouldn't let her children play with ours, but she had persuaded all the neighbors to keep away from us. She won't let Billy be friends with us or anything. We've been here most a month and haven't made any friends yet," and a tiny tear rolled down Jean's cheek.

"Does it worry you so much, daughter?"

"I know I'm foolish, Pops, but it bothers me a little. I get kind of envious when I see Lina Hamilton and Frances Black walking up and down the sidewalk with their arms around each other—and Billy and Jimmy hang over the fence talking to them."

"Little snobs!"

"But really, Pops, they are not. They really and truly want to talk to me just as much as I do to them. I'd feel much worse about it if I didn't know it isn't their fault. It's the grown-ups that keep them from being nice to us. They don't look at me a bit scornfully. I believe they like me. Josephine never stops nagging her mother about our children, so Deci tells Susan."

"Good for Josephine!" laughed Mr. Price. "I'm sorry, Jean dear, sorry that your feelings should be hurt, but if

that little Josephine is determined to break the maternal iceberg, I'll bet on her success. That child has character. In the meantime—heads up and chins in! We'll not let them know it makes any difference to us whether they make friends with us or not. We've lived some time without them and we can go on doing it. Eh, little daughter?"

"Of course we can! But I'd like to walk up and down the sidewalk with my arm linked in theirs," sighed Jean, as she kissed her father good night. "I thought when we left New York and came South to live that we'd make lots of friends, but I believe New York is warmer-hearted than this town."

CHAPTER X

WILKES BOOTH LINCOLN WRITES

ILLY was in receipt of a letter from Wilkes Booth Lincoln.

Hollywood, California
July 1st.

My dear Mr. Billy:

It seems funny to be calling you that but I reckon you will be Mister to me for the rest of time. I know you ain't hankering to be Mister but there ain't any helping it. It is mighty nice to be writing to you and letting myself go on the ain'ts. Out here in California us colored folks are obliged to be powerful particular about our grammar because we don't want to be considered uneducated and let the white movie maggots

think they can put too much over on us.

There is quite a passel of us at work for my company and plenty more drawing big pay from the other big companies. I have steady work and steady pay. I don't make so much as some but what I make I make steady. I am sending you $500 to bank for me and I reckon you best not say too much about my saving so much because my mammy might take a notion to turn up in Hollywood with all the children from Thessalonians down to Funnymental. I reckon she'd make quite a hit on the screen but she mustn't ever know it because I'm here to tell you, Mr. Billy, Mammy would create some rumpus if she'd arrive in these parts with that biling of children.

You and Major just bank my money for me and say nothing about it. I

ain't repositing it here because somehow I don't trust these banks like I do the one back home. There's too much money rolling in and rolling out here. I'm afraid they might make some mistake and get my dough mixed up with theirs and I won't ever see it again.

Being in moving pictures is sho work. It ain't the soft job it's cracked up to be. Sometimes you have to get up before sunup when we have to go on location. Plenty of times we work all night in the studio. That is mighty hard on me who was always an easy sleeper. One time when I was acting a cannibal I went to sleep standing up and fell into the pot meant for the mishumnary (I ain't exactly sho about how to spell that word).

Most of the times I might just as well be playing housekeeping the way we used to with Miss Frances and Miss

Lina and that Mister Jimmy. (It sho goes against me to call that there Jimmy Mister. It don't seem natural.) You remember, when we used to play house, I all the time had to play I was working, cleaning up and fetching and carrying for Miss Lina. It wasn't much play for me. I thought I might just as well be working for Aunt Cindy and be getting through. Well, out here in Hollywood I am still playing I'm working—scrubbing, washing windows, sweeping, carrying trunks, milking, cleaning out stables and the likes. I often feel like thanking Aunt Cindy for learning me how to do things so well. The director don't never have to tell me how to do my work like he does some. D. W. Griffith and Cecil de Mille themselves can't tell me how to scrub after I done graduated at the Aunt Cindy College.

What I like best is acting sleeping car porter. I always did want to be one and I ain't forgetting that it was pretending I was one that got me my job, that time we were playing movies. I ain't so crazy about stripping for cannibal parts and mumbojumboing with rings in my nose and ears. Those things make me dream of nights. I dream I'm really and truly sticking spears in folks and sometimes cooking fat folks and eating them, except I never get quite so far in my dream to find out what they taste like.

I get mighty homesick and lonesome sometimes, but most generally I work so hard I don't have much time to study about all of you back in Tennessee. I got a chance to go with a colored company, all star colored cast, but somehow I thought I'd go on working for the

white folks as long as they want me. I kinder figured I'd do better with them than with this minstrel company. My boss is all time wishing he'd brought Uncle Jimber-jawed Jupiter out here to Hollywood. He says he's got the best screen presents he knows. He may send for him yet. The only thing about it is he's afraid the old man would be such a pest once he got here. I ain't afraid he'd be one—I just *know* he would be, but you needn't tell Aunt Cindy I said so. I reckon Aunt Cindy'll say what she thinks about old Uncle Jupiter, but she wouldn't let anybody else say the same. I've got a nice room with a high class colored family and I'd sho hate to have to share it with Uncle Jupiter and his old blue coat with the brass buttons. That old blue coat may be a good one to be in the movies, just like Uncle Jupi-

ter, but it has sho got its drawbacks in the way of perfumery, just like he has.

The family I'm living with is all in the movies from the father and mother plumb through the six children and the two cats, three dogs, billy goat, flea bitten mule and pet duck. They ain't on regular but they are what they call good reliable extras. Their back yard gets took often and for that reason Mrs. Turner can't keep it as tidy as she'd like to have it. She's a powerful particular lady and don't hanker to have tin cans and tumble-down fences on her primerces, but money is money and sometimes she gets paid handsome for them cans when the goat is playing the lead.

I am wondering whether or not Decimus Ultimus has ever got reading and writing into her head. I have been hoping she'd get learned enough to write

to me sometimes. She's got since enough, too much sometimes, but it looks like there ain't any room for book learning in her skull. I'm mighty glad I got some book learning myself. I wish I could go to school some more but being in the movies keeps me on the go all the time.

I do lots of gym work when I'm not busy in the studio. If you can turn flip-flops down the steps without breaking your neck you are liable to go mighty far in the movies. I ain't broke mine yet. Seems like I've growed a full foot since I come to California. I've took on muscle too because of boxing in the gym. I don't like boxing much because you know I never was much of a hand at hitting. Seems like I ain't got the heart to hurt folks. I'd kinder like to get big and strong enough to wallop Thesalon-

ians and Biddle the way they done me many a time just because I was too little to hit back.

I'd sho admire to get a letter from you soon. Remember me to all enquiring friends. Tell them yes, I see Miss Mary Pickford and Mr. Douglas Fairbanks most any day but they ain't seen me yet. Farina is a sho nuf boy and a mighty likely little chap at that and Mr. Wallace Beery is right kind faceded when he is walking on the street.

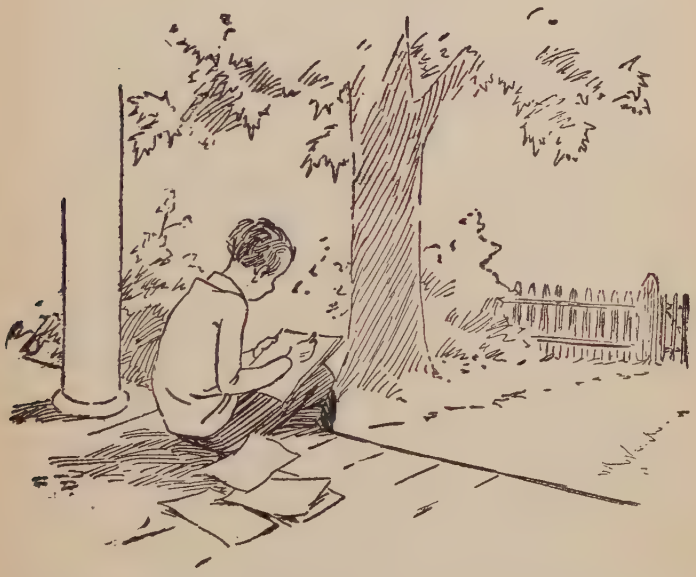
Yours respectfully,
Wilkes Booth Lincoln.

The following afternoon Billy sat on the front porch and penned his reply. He didn't want Wilkes Booth Lincoln to be held in suspense.

Dear Nicky:

Mr. Billy much! It sounds too foolish for anything for you to call me

Mister. I put your money in the bank and got a fine new shiny bank book to show you it is all safe. Major says you ought to buy a real estate bond with



that money and let it make $30 a year for you. If you want me to do it just say so and I'll get Major to attend to it for you. Major says when money be-

gins to make money for you you are on the road to wealth.

I'm mighty proud of you to be doing so well. All of us are. Even Aunt Minerva is, although she won't come out and say so in so many word. Of course Aunt Minerva is awfully religious and she can't quite make up her mind that a person who is play acting is good. Aunt Minerva is having a hard summer and it's all because she won't give in about our new neighbors. She made up her mind in the beginning she wasn't going to like them and she put down her foot good and hard and said Jo and I mustn't be friendly with them. Nothing will budge her. The funny thing is she thinks she is being so Christian all the time. Nothing but a jolt of some kind will make her see reason. The jolt will come, too, mark my word.

Jimmy and I have been right bored with nothing much to do until lately and now we are going to whoopee right smart. We are going to have a flying machine field just outside of town, down on beyond where Tom Collins used to live. They are building a hangar there and are going to have three machines to take people up for $3 a trip, so they say. Anyhow, one machine is already here and two men and another one coming pretty soon. Jimmy and I loaf around on the grounds all the time. We haven't been up yet because they are not ready for passengers. All I'm hoping is that Aunt Minerva won't get wise and try to make me promise never to go up in one. I don't believe I could promise that because Jimmy and I have about decided to be aviators. I had almost made up my mind to study law so I

could be Chief Justice of United States, but somehow I'd much rather be an aviator and so would Jimmy. In the first place, you can't be Chief Justice until you get real old and you can be an aviator as young as you choose. I'm old enough now if I don't tell how young I am. I'm so long-legged I know I could pass for old enough to fly.

Mr. Price, our new neighbor that Aunt Minerva won't let us know, was a camouflage artist during the war and used to paint airplanes and hangars and things so's the enemy couldn't tell them from trees and clouds. He can fly too—learned how and then got shot in the leg and had to stop fighting and paint the last part of the war. When Jimmy and I learn how to fly some day you'll be looking up at the sky, out there in Hollywood, and away off to the east

you'll see a speck and it'll grow and grow until it's an airplane and when it lands out we'll step—a non-stop flight from the Mississippi to the Pacific.

Tom Collins has already got himself a job out at the field and he knows what makes an airplane stay up in the air and all about the machinery and what makes the wheels go 'round. Tom is sure a humdinger when it comes to understanding. I reckon knowing so much about birds is what makes it easy for him to understand flying machines.

Deci can't read yet. Josephine works on her all the time but she never seems to catch on. She is a funny little girl and is certainly smart enough to outwit both Aunt Cindy and Aunt Minerva. She is learning how to be a mighty good cook. Sometimes Aunt Cindy lets her make a cake and she can beat the old

woman at it and that is something I'd rather die than let Aunt Cindy know I said. Aunt Cindy is getting mighty feeble and she is mighty afraid she will have to hand over the reins to some younger person before so very long. She is determined that Deci shall learn all she knows about cooking but the poor old woman would hate to have her outcook her.

Please write to me soon again. I never stop missing you and because I miss you is no reason why you should mister me.

Affectionately,

Billy.

CHAPTER XI

WORRY HOLES

HE business of flying was proving a lucrative one for the two young men who had rented a ten acre strip of land just outside of town, had erected thereon a hangar for their plane and for the sum of three dollars gave one the sensations of a bird. Of course, everybody wants to fly; but some have not the three dollars, some are too timid and nervous to trust themselves in the air, some have promised wife or husband never to fly, and some have been commanded by parents or guardians to keep their feet on the ground and leave flying to fools.

The Major longed to fly. He kept his

longing to himself, feeling sure that his wife would make him promise never to get in one of those inventions of the evil one if she found out it was his desire. If he could keep her from knowing he wanted to fly perhaps she would not think of exacting such a promise. Josephine was wild to fly. She dreamed she was floating through the air, catching a fleecy cloud and pinning it around her shoulders with golden stars and diamond crescents. The sound of a plane away off in the blue of the heavens seemed like angels' music to the child.

Her enthusiasm was shared by Billy and Jimmy. The boys did not dream the clouds were tulle veils to be pinned on with stars and new moons. They dreamed they were protecting important mail from marauding air bandits, making tail spins, looping loops, jump-

ing from plane to plane and behaving generally like the heroes in movie serials.

As for Aunt Cindy, she cherished a secret desire to go up just once.

"It's onchristian, I know," she muttered as she gazed longingly at a plane that had been circling over the town the whole afternoon. "It's downright wickedsome to be a tryin' to outdo Gawd in his wucks but I'd ruther go up in that flyin' boat than git a new gol' tooth."

"It ain't any unchristianer than riding in automobiles an' talkin' over telephones," suggested Josephine, who stood near the old woman gazing with equal longing at the dipping and gliding plane. "My father says there didn't useter be automobiles an' telephones an' even bicycles, an' ladies useter ride side-

ways on horseback with long, long skirts that pretty near touched the ground. Do you know, Aunt Cindy, I believe Daddy wants to fly just as much as you an' me."

"Well bless Bob! The day the Major flies ol' Cindy's gonter weight down her skirts an' fly too. You keep yo' eyes an' yers open, chil', an' yo' mouf shet, an' whatsomever you hears concernin' flyin' you come an' tell ol' Cindy."

Josephine promised. Her eyes sparkled with happiness. Her heart was light and her feet seemed winged. If her father and Aunt Cindy wanted to fly then surely the time was near when she might go up in the air. When grown-ups wanted to do something very much it usually came about that they did it. If it wasn't wrong for old persons to fly then it wasn't wrong for little girls.

All the Prices went up, but of course Mr. Price had an understanding heart. Josephine had gone to the flying field with her father on the afternoon that Mr. Price had conducted his whole family to that spot and had bargained with the owner of the plane to take them up in a job lot at half fare.

"They will worry me to death until I do it," that gentleman had explained to the Major. "It is a terrible extravagance, but I got an unexpected check this morning and it so happened it was an ad I had painted with an airplane in it and it seemed only fair for the kiddies to get some good out of it."

Mr. Price and the Major often had pleasant little chats when Miss Minerva was not around. Mr. Price seemed to understand how matters stood between his neighbor and the neighbor's wife.

Mrs. Estes was the one who had a prejudice against him and his children, adopted and otherwise, but since Major Estes was pleasant and cordial he would be pleasant and cordial in return and ignore the extreme rudeness of the belligerent wife.

"Seem to be nice young fellows running this business," said the Major.

"Fine. Ex-army man, that older one. Hartwell is his name. The younger one, Chester, was too young for the late war but he knows the flying game from the ground up. I was in the air service myself in France but got hurt and had to give it up—that was before the U. S. got in the fight. Then I did camouflage painting for the rest of the time."

"Then you can pilot a ship yourself?"

"Sure. But I'm rusty and wouldn't

try it now. I'm much better at painting an airplane than flying one. I am planning a picture now with one in it. I got the idea the other day when I was out in the country sketching. You see, painting pictures that there is no chance of selling is my recreation and vice. Making illustrations and advertisements is my livelihood."

"It must take many a brush stroke to take care of so many children," said the Major sympathetically.

"Yes, but they are wonderful kids. It is well worth it, but Jean and I have sworn off. We are never going to adopt any more. We meant to stop after the first lot, Silas and Susan, but it turned out that their father, Bob Kimball, had an incumbrance in the shape of little Wallace and before we knew it we had him too. Then my old friend, But-

ler Sweeney, disappeared off the face of the earth and there was nobody around to look after Patty and Punkin and it was up to Jean and me."

"All I can say is you are a good man, sir," said the Major.

"An improvident man, would be better," laughed Richard Price. "But I have a good daughter."

"You have indeed!" The Major spoke feelingly. Little Josephine, who had overheard the conversation, felt her father's hand tighten around hers and she understood.

"He's 'shamed 'cause we are so standoffish," she said to herself. "'Shamed an' mortified but can't say a word 'cause he's a gentleman an' gentlemen can't blame their wives before folks. I know that Daddy's gonter lay low an' before we know it things are gonter get

fixed up somehow an' Minerva's gonter come around like she always does. But she ain't gonter give in she's been wrong."

The first batch of Prices had flown and landed and the second batch was being strapped in. Jean must go both times so that she could hold one of the youngsters on her lap and keep order.

"No extra charge for the lady," declared Chester, the young aviator, looking at Jean with ill-concealed admiration. Her eyes were so sparkling and her cheeks so rosy and, child though she was, her watchful care of the little ones in her charge made her seem like a youthful madonna.

Silas and Susan and Punkin, the first to go up, were all affected differently by the flight. Silas was breathing deeply and on his sensitive face was an imperi-

ous expression, eyes very wide and his delicate nostrils quivering.

"Well, how about it, son?" asked Mr. Price, drawing the boy to him with an affectionate gesture.

"Oh, it makes me feel how many places I gotta see an' how many things I gotta do. All the rivers must have dams in them an' bridges over them. All the mountains have gotta be tunnelled an' all the roads must be straightened. Gee, there's a lotta work to do! Ain't there, Pops?"

"Yes, son, a lot! But I guess we can get it done if we start soon enough." Richard Price smiled whimsically. Silas was well known to be the laziest of all the children, but his adopted father had a feeling that the time would come when the boy would wake up and outdo them all in industry. He must be al-

lowed to follow some vocation that interested him. Who knows but that little Silas Kimball would not some day be the world's greatest civil engineer?

Going up in the air had been not nearly so pleasant as Susan had expected it to be. In the first place, she had a vague feeling of unrest in her tummy. "When we turned and twisted so, it seems like my innards didn't get back where they belonged. My heart's a thumpin' on my right side 'steader my left an' I feel like my big toes are all turned into thumbs an' hair's growing on the soles of my feet. I got to thinkin' about Geraldine up there an' it looked like I'd die if I couldn't get back on the ground with her. I bet Geraldine would miss me a lot if I'd a gone flyin' off forever an' never come back."

"She certainly would," Pops solemn-

ly agreed. "Lie down a minute in the shade, honey, and you'll feel better." He made Susan comfortable on a mossy bank in the shade with his coat under her little befuddled head.

"Funny little girl," he said on rejoining the Major. "I fancy she'll always have her feet right on the ground. Well, how about you, Punkin? See anything different up in the clouds?"

Punkin had been bursting to speak but felt that the indisposition of Susan must be respected.

"I saw—I saw—big birds—as big as choo-choo cars. I saw whole lots of doll baby houses way down below an' whole lots of little bitser trees no bigger'n bushes, an' whole lots of good worry holes to crawl in."

"What are worry holes?" asked the Major.

"They's places I go to worry in," Punkin solemnly answered.

"What do you have to worry about?" quizzed the Major.

"Nothin', but if I didn't have a plenty er worry holes I'd have heaps to worry about," and Punkin walked off with the dignity of a small Napoleon and lay down by Susan so that he might gaze into the sky and watch the flight of the second batch of Prices.

"What a funny little boy!" laughed the Major.

"The most amusing of all of my children," declared Richard Price. "I often wonder what juvenile experts would say about Punkin. One thing sure, they would not agree on how to manage him. He has the most delightful imagination I have ever known. The whole of his world is peopled with

make-believes. Everything talks to him; the trees, the flowers, the grass, wind and rain. He even holds conversations with Geraldine, the turtle."

The Major smiled, remembering his own little Josephine's imaginary Flumpy, who finally materialized into a real flesh and blood dog. Josephine remembered too and laughed softly to herself as she recalled the invisible playmate of her babyhood. How kind and understanding her father had been about this same Flumpy! How careful he had always been to step over the spot where the supposed dog was lying! Her mother had been quite stern about Flumpy and all the little daughter's daydreams. Josephine could recall punishments about this habit of the imagination she had developed when a tiny tot. Miss Minerva had called it

plain lying and dealt with it as such.

Josephine looked longingly at Susan and Punkin. If the Major could talk to Mr. Price, why couldn't she play with Susan and Punkin? Why should there

be one rule for grown-ups and another for children? Why shouldn't the Major obey as well as Josephine? Why should Miss Minerva feel so unkindly towards

her neighbors just because they lived in an old street car? A street car was just as respectable to live in as a stable—and wasn't Minerva always reading to her little daughter out of the Bible about Jesus and his being born in a manger? Perhaps if the Prices had been born in a street car Minerva would feel differently about it. Then Josephine remembered the stories her mother had read her of the early Christians and how they had disobeyed the rulers and followed Christ in the face of all commands.

"I'm gonter be a early Christian," Josephine said to herself stoutly. "I'm gonter talk to my neighbors jes' because they do sleep in a street car, an' if Minerva objects I'll make her give a better reason than street cars an' goin' by numbers 'stead of names."

She drew her hand from her father's and walked over to where Susan and Punkin were lying in the shade gazing up at the great man-made bird as it circled above them.

"Hello, Four an' One! Ain't flyin' grand?"

CHAPTER XII

THE STOWAWAY

HE plane made a lovely landing. As soon as the engine stopped buzzing and the propeller ceased to whirl the spectators at the flying field crowded up to see how the last batch of Prices had enjoyed the ride. The astonishment was great and the merriment loud when it turned out that there were not only the four white passengers but one colored one. Deci had managed to stow herself away in an inconceivably small space, not making her presence known until the plane was in full flight. Then she had popped her little woolly head up between Jack and Wallace with the remark:

"Here's me!"

There she certainly was and there she stayed, as happy a little darkey as there was in the whole world. They made room for her, everybody moving over just a little. Wallace even offered to let her tie herself to his strap in case Chester should decide to fly upside down, but Deci declined this offer.

"We's widged in here so tight it would take mo'n upinside down to loosen us," she declared with a gasp. "Gawd in Heaben! If this is flyin' then me fer the goldin streets. I reckon I gotta be a pow'ful good gal after this so's I kin make sho' er Heaben."

Naturally none of the other passengers could hear her (no one ever hears anything while flying) but Deci chattered on.

"I done beat all my white folks to it

an' Aunt Cindy too. They kin put me in the lockup fer stealin' a ride, but praise the Lawd, they can't take my ride away from me! I done got this ride in my cistern fer good an' all. Lookit! Yonder's Miss Minerva's house as natural as life but moughty teensy an' mashed down in the roof. An' Aunt Cindy's little house in the back ain't no bigger'n a martin box. I see sumpen a comin' down her steps but I can't make out whether it's Aunt Cindy or that ol' dominicker hin what's always lookin' aroun' fer a feather bed to lay a aig on. Lookin' at 'em from the top Aunt Cindy an' that ol' hin favor one anudder right smart."

Deci was silent for a moment; then she shouted in Jack's ear:

"Do you reckon I'd fall out if I leant over the side jes' a leetle bit?"

"What for?" he yelled.

"I'd sho' like to spit on Aunt Cindy's house jes' to say I done it. I don't mean it fer no meanness, but jes' to give out I done did it nex' time I pass a call over in the quarters." But before Deci could accomplish her desire the plane had turned and sped far away from Aunt Cindy's house.

"Ne'min'. I'll have plenty er fun sayin' I coulder done it an' it'll make Aunt Cindy plenty mad to hear tell I coulder."

"Lawdy! That lil strip er nothin' over yonder is the Mississippi—Ol' Man Riber a rollin' erlong. An' if there ain't a steamboat a floatin' on it lookin' 'bout as big as a walnut shell! An' that's the Memphis road with artermobiles travelin' on it—leastways I reckon they is artermobiles if they do look like

chinches a zigzaggin' about their mischief."

As they started on their homeward flight Decimus Ultimus quieted down. Evidently she was contemplating what defense she could put up; what explanation she could make for her presence in the plane. She looked down a moment at her left hand which had been tightly clutching the strap which held Wallace. She breathed a relieved sigh and settled herself to enjoy the rest of the trip. Inspiration had come as she gazed on the little bead ring which she wore on her left hand.

The white children clambered out as soon as the plane came to a standstill, all of them eager to tell where they had been, what they had seen and what their sensations were. Cleopatra, as she stepped from her silk-draped, flower-

decked barge, could not have assumed a more regal bearing than did our little Decimus Ultimus as she prepared to leave the plane after her stolen ride.

"Well, who's here?" exclaimed Chester as he spied the extra passenger for the first time. In the air he had been too busy driving to note the supercargo. "How'd you get in, Topsy?"

"Ain't no Topsy in," declared Deci. "My name's Decimus Ultimus, Mister, an' I'm askin' you how come you took me up in the air 'thout insultin' me fust. My bead ring done drap off'n my finger in the bottom er yo' airyplame an' I got in to find it an' befo' I could so much as turn aroun' you done piled a passel er white chilluns in on top er me an'—an'—we wuz up too high fer me to git out befo' I knowed we'd even started."

"Is that so?" laughed Chester. "But

tell me, Miss Decimus Ultimus, how did your bead ring get in my plane?"

"I done tol' you it slipped off'n my finger. It's that loose—see!"

"Yes, but how did your finger get in the plane?"

"I ain't never said my finger got in yo' plame. I said it wa' my bead ring that got in yo' plame."

"But your finger must have been pretty close to my plane for the ring to slip off," insisted Chester, trying to look severe but not able to conceal his amusement.

"Well, you ain't got up no signs sayin' fingers mustn't come close to yo' big turkey-buzzard," declared Deci. "I reckon I comed closter than I 'lowed an' my bead ring was looser than I knowed an'—"

"Well, never mind, kid, but you'd best

not stowaway again. I might have to charge you three dollars."

"Whoopee! I'm a gonter stop my insuriance an' use what nickles an' dimes I been a puttin' in that an' save up fer flyin'," and Deci disappeared in the almost magic way she had. Now you see her and now you don't! It was time to set the supper table and she must hurry home before Aunt Cindy got on the rampage.

Deci could disappear as if by magic, and she could also appear with the most remarkable suddenness. Aunt Cindy was not quite on the rampage but she was beginning to fret and fume because supper was almost ready and seemingly there was no Deci to set the table. An added grievance was that the rolls had risen much too soon, owing to the hot day, and Aunt Cindy had been com-

pelled to put them in the refrigerator or bake them long before supper time.

"I ain't holdin' to no sich customariness," the old woman muttered. "In my day rolls never rose befo' they time. It looks like things air contrary sence artermobiles an' telephomes an' flyin' machines come thisaway. Now here's that there Deci galivantin' anywhere but where she's s'posed ter be. Table ain't set—ice water ain't made—that gal's gonter be the death er me. If I didn't know she had a few draps er Sis Blue Gum Tempy's blood in her black veins I'd give up an' git Miss Minerva ter ship her back to wha' she come from. I'm always a lookin' fer some er Sis Blue Gum Tempy ter 'sert herself. To be sho' she's smart enough, that there Deci is, but she's too promiscuous in her wharabouts."

In the meantime Deci had crept in the side door and had gone about noiselessly to set the supper table. Like a little black cat she had crept from sideboard to table to china press. The crocheted mats were placed with great

precision—a big one for each plate, a middle sized one for each bread and butter plate, and a small one for each glass. Knives and forks and spoons were

ranged in orderly rows, just so far from the edge of the table. Miss Minerva had taught the child to set a table and no one in that town knew how to set a table better than Miss Minerva. Deci had proven an apt pupil and now that part of the menage could be trusted to her even if the preacher himself was coming to dinner—or a visiting bishop.

Once, and only once, had Deci fallen from grace in the manner of setting the table. It was a never-to-be-forgotten occasion and the Major and Billy were still laughing about it on the sly, although it had happened months before. Deci had gone on a trip to Memphis on a big river steamboat with Sam Lamb's family. Her sharp eyes had taken in every detail of the boat from bow to stern, from hold to pilot house. What had impressed her most was the white

folks' saloon with the long narrow tables and the stylish waiters bearing aloft with unbelievable dexterity trays stacked high with food in innumerable china bird baths. The tables were set not at all according to Miss Minerva's idea of perfection, but Deci thought nothing was ever so elegant as those tables. She made a mental note of every item and as soon as she got back home put her knowledge to some use. What benefits does one receive from traveling if one does not really profit by the experience?

At six, when the family assembled for supper, the table was wonderful to behold. The new president of the Ladies' Tuesday Club was there and a missionary just home from Zanzibar. Miss Minerva was so sure of her pupil that she had not even gone in to look at

the table to see that everything was as it should be. Deci knew her job, and the mistress, being late coming home from a club luncheon followed by a missionary meeting, had time only for a quick change of dress before her guests should arrive. Deci was all right. She could trust Deci. Aunt Cindy never trusted anyone of her own color implicitly, but Aunt Cindy was very busy seeing that the Sally Lunn browned to the right shade and that the chickens were broiled the way Miss Minerva liked them and that the foamy sauce was made as it should be for the apple dumpling. So Aunt Cindy was forced to trust the setting of the table to Deci. Usually she waddled into the dining room before a meal was announced to see that things were as they should be, but on that fatal evening she forgot to do so.

"Po' the water, put aroun' the butter an' then tap the gong," commanded Aunt Cindy. "Victuals air ready."

Deci did as she was bid and then stood aside, her face beaming with excitement. She was expecting great praise for the beautiful effect of the table so carefully set according to the steamboat manner.

The first thing that greeted the eye was the napkins, Miss Minerva's very best damask. They were folded to simulate calla lilies and each one stuck in a goblet. The knives and forks and spoons were stacked in front of each plate like a stand of army rifles. In the center of the table instead of the usual tasteful bowl of cut flowers was a great gaudy vase filled with paper flowers, red, yellow and lavender. Deci had bought the vase herself at the five and

ten cent store and under the tuition of Mrs. Sam Lamb had concocted the flowers out of crepe paper. It was a perfect replica of a Mississippi steamboat table.

It was several weeks before Deci could be trusted again. It was a great mortification to the child that her effort was not appreciated by the mistress but what made her feel worse than Miss Minerva's disapproval were the shouts of laughter from the Major and Billy. If persons were to be laughed at, Deci wanted to be the one to do the laughing. It was balm to her wounded feelings, however, that her beloved Josephine praised the table and wished they could have it set that way always.

On the day of the stolen flight never had a supper table been laid with more precision. Not once had a rattle of sil-

ver or click of glass or china betrayed to Aunt Cindy the presence of the delinquent Deci. She was noiseless even in extracting ice from the refrigerator for the tea, timing the pick so that its pecking synchronized with the rattling of Aunt Cindy's pots and pans.

"Wha' that there gal? Supper ready to dish up an' no table sot an' no ice cracked! White folks all zembled an' stomicks a growlin' an' that limb er Satan off gittin' in mischeef. I reckon I'll haveter holt back supper an' sot the table myself even it ain't my business. I've a great min' to let it go onsot an' see if Miss Minerva won't fire that turkey trottin' buzzard of a Deci."

Deci hid behind the refrigerator in the pantry, her hand over her mouth to keep in the laugh that threatened to burst out. Aunt Cindy pushed her way

through the swinging door and waddled on into the dining room.

"Well Good Gawd!" she gasped. "If He ain't sot a table in the presence of His enemies—meanin' that she-debble Deci."

A smothered giggle from the region of the refrigerator brought the old woman to herself.

"Wha' you been an' what you been a doin'?" wrathfully.

"I been layin' the table 'cordin' to Miss Minerva's dictaters. Any fault to fin' with the way I sot it?"

"Whefo' you come a cropin' in like a snake? Whefo' you didn't make no noise so's I could know you was here?"

"You an' Miss Minerva been all time tellin' me not to rattle an' I's tryin' to be a good gal an' mind all you an' Miss Minerva tells me," spake Deci with a

pious roll to her eyes. "I been so nigh unto Heaben this day that I feels mo' an' mo' mus' I try to sancterfy myself."

"Near Heaben! Whatcher mean near Heaben?"

"I been up in the flyin' machine."

"Gal, you's lyin'!"

"Cross my heart an' body an' hope ter die if I ain't been up in a airplame a circlin' all aroun' an' dippin' up an' down. I wint right over yo' house an' coulder spit on it if I hadn't helt you in so much respectfulness. I mought even a spit on you as you come down yo' steps."

Aunt Cindy remembered that she had been in the act of going down the steps of her little house at the moment when a plane had actually passed directly over her.

"Lawd! I believe you're tellin' the troof in spite of yo' self," she said.

"How much did it cost you an' wha' did you git the money?"

"It never cost me nothin' cause I got took up."

"An' who took you?"

"Miss Minerva's neighbors took me."

"If that don't beat all! Well, what you standin' there for like you done took root? Go tap the gong an' let the white folks know that victuals is up. An' nex' time you sot the table see that you ain't so mousy about it."

CHAPTER XIII

AUNT CINDY TAKES THE AIR

THE next day was Thursday and Aunt Cindy's afternoon off, not that she ever took an afternoon off, not really off. She used to make a great show of going, but when supper time came Aunt Cindy was always on hand with as good a meal for her beloved white folks as they had on Tuesday or Friday or any other day in the week. The only difference in the order of things was that the old woman would wear her 'next best black silk dress, with a white apron instead of a gingham one. Being so dressed up, of course she could not wash the supper dishes or even dry them, but she sat solemnly by and did what she

called "the haid wuck" while Deci did the manual labor.

On this Thursday Aunt Cindy announced she was really going off. "I gotta little business to ten' to," she told her mistress. "I'm gonter have everything ready so all Deci'll haveter do is tote it to the table. I reckon the Major'll haveter put up with sliced bread for onct. It'll be the fust time in many a year cause you an' me has seen to it that the Major gits his daily bread as reg'lar as he prays fer it." Aunt Cindy had always interpreted that portion of the Lord's Prayer to mean hot, home-made bread. "I reckon a little col' bread won't chill his stomick for onct, though it may so-prize him."

"Of course it will not," agreed Miss Minerva. "I might make some biscuit for him myself except that I have prom-

ised to go driving with him. Now Deci—"

"Don't suggest that gal makin' up nothin', Miss Minerva. She's too nimble come trimble as it is. I don't like her foolin' 'roun' my kitchen too much a blackin' up my pans an' greasin' up my pots an' kittles."

So Aunt Cindy took her day off, or rather her afternoon off. With pomp and ceremony and mystery she went to her cabin as soon as the early dinner was out of the way. With locked doors and drawn shades she began to prepare as for some sacred ceremony. First she bathed. Deci, who was filled with impish curiosity, heard the loud splashings from the lean-to room where she was hiding to find out if possible what was the mysterious business on which Aunt Cindy was bent. With her eye glued

to the keyhole she followed with difficulty the movements of the old woman as she lumbered back and forth across her room.

The great old chest of drawers was in Deci's line of vision and she could see Aunt Cindy pulling open the bottom drawer where, the child well knew, the old woman kept her best clothes saved to be buried in. Garment after garment was taken out, unfolded with various accompanying ejaculations, shaken out and then donned. White stockings were unrolled and held up critically and then put back in the drawer.

"Black's best under the circus standings," Aunt Cindy muttered. "Them white ones is too short for anything lessen it's a corpse with nothin' but the face an' folded hands a showin'."

A pair of black ones were taken from

the middle drawer and held up for inspection.

"Mustn't be no holes on this day."

Deci was grateful that most of Aunt Cindy's manoeuvres were taking place near the chest of drawers. She was also glad that the old woman had a habit of talking to herself, as this trait would probably clear up the mystery of what she intended to do.

"I wisht I had one er them big black stockings of hers come nex' Christmas," thought Deci. "I reckon ol' Santy would put as much as a pianner in sech a stockin' as that."

Next Aunt Cindy took out her very best black silk dress, the one the Major gave her only year before last.

"A hot day fer black silk but this is a impo'tant job I done undertook an' it calls fer black silk if any job ever did.

Gawd er mighty, I come pretty nigh fergittin' my scent! I ain't gotta save that ter be buried in an' I'm gonter use it up this day." With that she opened a bottle of perfume and liberally applied it to her perspiring person. Soon the black silk was on, and the bonnet trimmed with pansies and bobbing velvet bows. After she was completely dressed Aunt Cindy bethought her of shoes.

"It's gotta be did," she sighed. "If it wa'n't fer shoes I'd be a better Christian ooman. I don't want no goldin slippers in Heaben. I want to go bar'foot when I've a mind an' some good ol' congress gaiters or cyarpet slippers for dress-up. I got no 'pinion er these here fancy patem leathers that there Mary Jane worried me into buyin'. I reckon I oughter wear 'em to-day though."

She sat down heavily and with difficulty pulled on the hated patent leathers. Then she took from her workbasket two yards of red elastic that Deci knew Miss Minerva had purchased for Aunt Cindy's new garters.

"Mos' ready to go wha' she's goin'," said Deci to herself. "I wisht I knew what she's gonter do with the 'lastic. I reckon I'd bes' hurry up an' be wha' she thinks I is."

Back to the kitchen she flew and with a great rattle of pots and pans convinced Aunt Cindy that she was finishing up the dinner dishes as that old woman came from her room and stood sedately on the porch in all the glory of her burial clothes—except for the addition of the pansy bonnet, patent leather shoes, and black stockings.

A rattle of machinery, a toot of a

horn and there was Sambo in his truck drawn up to the curb in front of Miss Minerva's. Aunt Cindy sailed forth, and what seemed passing strange to Decimus Ultimus was that she forgot to admonish her about work to be done in her absence and gave no added directions about supper. She merely floated off in her stiff black silk. With the help of Sambo, and some steps formed of soap boxes, she finally got into the back of the truck, the tail gate being down.

Deci could hold in no longer. She dropped the dish rag and ran from the kitchen, determined to find out what Aunt Cindy was up to. The last she saw of her aged mentor she was enthroned in the back of Sambo's truck, her best black silk spread out around her like the tail of a fantail pigeon and her legs stuck straight out so that the patent

leather shoes glistened in the sunlight.

"Bless Bob, if she ain't put somethin' over on me!" exclaimed Deci. "She done got a message to Sambo all 'thout my knowin' about it an' now she done gone to parts unknown. Here I gotta stay home an' min' the house all the res' of the day an' maybe I won't never know whar Aunt Cindy done gone. Maybe I kin git it outer Sambo—an' agin maybe I can't. Sambo's smarter than these folks around here—all 'cept-in' me. I's smarter than any of them. I feels it in me that I's smarter than they is. Readin' don't matter none. I reckon I could learn how to read if there was any sense in it. Maybe I'll learn yet."

The child turned and started back to the kitchen. Suddenly she had a thought as she spied Josephine coming out of the front door.

"Hi there, Josephime! Let's get Miss Minerva to 'low us to make a chocolid cake soon's I git the dishes all washed. An' we mought make a mess er pull candy too. You ax her whilst I finish up. Aunt Cindy's gone fer the day an' we won't have no bosses tellin' us we mus' an' we mus'n'."

"Goody, goody, gee!" cried Josephine. "I'm pretty near sure she will because she'd pretty near let me do anything rather than see my dear Prices."

Miss Minerva was agreeable to the proposition and in a short while the dishes were washed and put away and Deci and Josephine were up to their necks in cake batter, molasses, and brown sugar.

Deci was in her element. Not only did she have her beloved Josephine to herself, but she was the captain of the

occasion. She it was who knew how to mix batter and how to bake it. To be sure Josephine read the recipe in the cookbook, but Deci paid very little attention to recipes. Like many a born cook she cooked by instinct and feeling.

"Whut I care whut the ol' book say. I reckon I knows already that cake is gonter have butter an' sugar an' aigs an' flour, an' if your foot slips an' you puts mo' sugar in than you should all you gotta do is pinch off a lil mo' butter an' dump it in with a dash mo' flour. As fer aigs, use all you kin squeeze outer the hins. My gran'mammy says she ain't never yit seed a cake with a superflewing er aigs. As fer vugnilla, go light with that if it's this here kind that Miss Minerva buys. I declar Miss Minerva's vugnilla is good ernough to scent up yo'se'f fer church."

Josephine beat the whites of the eggs while Deci creamed the butter and sugar and deftly combined all the ingredients into the perfect whole.

"Grease them pans well. We don't want no cakes stickin' on us," commanded Deci. "Well lookit! If I ain't mixed up enough batter to make six layers. Three layers is enough fer any cake less'n we want it to look like the Tower of Babel in the Bible pixtures. I been a thinkin' we mought make two cakes an' take one of 'em over to our neighbors."

"But my mother—" objected Josephine.

"Sho', I know about Miss Minerva. But this here cake air gonter be a secret offerin' an' they ain't a gonter know who sent it an' nobody but us-all ain't gonter know whar it's goin'."

"It would be splendid," agreed Josephine.

"We kin tote it over with our lef' hands an' then we'll be doin' what the Bible says the way Miss Minerva done read it to me. We won't let our right hands know what our lef' hands is up to."

"Now whilst the cakes air a bakin' we'll bile the candy. If we has good luck we kin do a little lef' handed givin' of candy to our neighbors, too. The maindes' thing about candy is not to stir it whilst it is bilin' an' let it bile a plenty, not too fast but jes' gentle an' bubblin'."

The candy was on and the cake baking. Deci and Josephine busied themselves buttering plates in which to cool the candy for pulling and grating chocolate for the cake icing.

"Gee, but this is fun!" declared Josephine. "I wish Aunt Cindy would take a day off every week. Where has she gone, Deci?"

"Gawd knows an' I ain't in commundication with Him. She's dressed up fit for a fumeral all cept'n her Johnny-jump-up bonnet. But nobody ain't daid er even dyin' that I knows of in the Ten' The Sick an' Bury The Daid Sassiety. She went off with her feet stuck out the back er Mr. Sambo's truck. I'm bustin' to know what she's up to—patem leathers an' all."

Three layers of the cake done and turned out on the table, three more baking and the candy forming a hard ball when dropped in cold water! What busy little girls!

"Now soon as it's safte to handle we'll pull it an' pray Gawd the cake'll be

done by the time it gits cold. I ain't much of a han' to do three fo' things at onct. Too much like pattin' yo' haid an' rubbin' yo' stomick to be bakin' cake an' pullin' candy at the same time."

The cake baked quickly and the candy took a long time to cool, since it was a very hot day, so everything was turning out to suit the youthful cooks. The taffy came up from the buttered plates in lovely hunks, and just the right consistency to pull. Out in the back yard they went, each one intent on making hers the lighter in color.

"I done noticed white folks kin always pull candy lighter than colored folks," declared Deci when on comparing the two Josephine was undoubtedly ahead.

"Do you reckon you rub off on yours?"

"I mought. Somehow, no matter how much I washes, I can't pull candy very light. But listen—there's the airy-plame a comin'! Jes' think I wa' up yonder myself yestiddy!"

"Some day maybe I can go up," said Josephine, wistfully.

"Maybe. But you gotta do a lotta persuasionin' on Miss Minerva fust."

The children stopped pulling the candy and gazed with eager eyes into the western sky as the airplane came into view dipping and rising with consummate grace, the motor humming loudly and happily. Closer and closer it came and as it approached it made a decided swoop downward as though to seize the little girls. Frightened, they ran for cover on the back porch. From the passenger's seat in the plane there floated two black objects, landing on

the woodhouse roof and bouncing down to the hollyhocks below.

"Great Gawd in Heaben! Aunt Cindy's patem leathers!" cried Deci. "Now I know whar she wa' a goin' at an' what she wa' a gonter do with that there big piece of red garter 'lastic. She wa' gonter holt down her skirts with it in case of accidents."

* * * * *

Aunt Cindy came home in plenty of time to do the "haid wuck" for supper although she was so full of joy that her feet were hardly on the ground. Mere food seemed of small importance to her after having been so far up in the sky. She even kept on her best burial silk and neglected to put on the usual apron as she sat by the kitchen table and recounted her adventures to Billy and Josephine.

"I rid in a ox cart when I was a gal an' I done determined that befo' I ride in a hearse I was a gonter ride in a airy-plane. I got Sambo to tote me over to the place where they hitches the airy-planes an' to trade with the driver how much he would charge to take me up. That there Mr. Chester is a likely young man but we had to do right smart persuadin' to get him to take me up. He was scairt I'd be scairt. But he finally come aroun' an' he an' Sambo together got me histed into the bumble seat. I woulder felt fine if it hadn't a been for my feet. It looked like those ol' shiny shoes wa' gonter burn me up. Somehow I got 'em off an' I thanked the stars that I was gonter fly by myself 'thout nobody in the bumble seat with me. As we rose up I got ter thinkin' 'bout how crazy I'd look crawlin' outer

that hole with my shoes in my han' an' whin it come to me that we wa' jes' about over home I throwed 'er out as fur as I could an' Deci done tol' me they lit in the hollyhawks."

"Didn't you feel funny when you got out in your stocking feet?" asked Josephine.

"No, chil', I never felt noways atall. Feet wa'n't worryin' me none after all I been doin' an' seein'. Seemed like wings were a sproutin' out'n my shoulder blades an' feet wa'n't no mo' use to me than to a snake. I done tol' the young man to ride me five dollars wuth an' he give me good measure for sho'. We flew away up an' then we went on down the riber an' bless Bob, if we didn't go right over the ol' plantation. I could see the great house an' the quarters as plain as day. But they wuz moughty teensy an'

flat lookin'. I feel like I done got religion all over. I seed the glory er Gawd spread all about me an' I praise Him that He's let me ride in a ox cart an' then in a airyplane an' that He has let me be a slave so's I kin now be free."

CHAPTER XIV

ENTER MR. BUCK

R. PRICE had worked hard on the illustrations of the Bible stories, so hard and so faithfully in fact that all were finished and accepted by the publishers with flattering enthusiasm. And best of all, a substantial payment had been made, enough to make the artist feel that now he might stop making money for a while and paint what he wanted to paint for the mere love of it. The balance in the bank was large enough to insure the feeding and clothing of the children, adopted and otherwise, for at least six months. Not that he intended to paint for fun for six months, but it gave him a feeling of hav-

ing earned his holiday and he was determined to begin on the composition he had in mind and to take his time in working it out.

Skirting the flying field was a sweet old country lane, a relic of the times before automobiles had come to ruin the picturesque appearance of the countryside with straight, hard-surfaced roads. Once, on an early morning walk, the artist had come upon the idea for his picture. Down this shady, pleasant lane lumbered a team of oxen drawing a covered wagon of the type known as a "trading cart." Suddenly, from the misty blue of the heavens, appeared an airplane. There was the picture! In the foreground the plodding oxen with the blue-shirted teamster and the canvas covered cart! In the sky the swooping plane with sunlight glinting on its

wings. The impression was fast fixed in the mind's eye of the artist. Many preliminary sketches must be made determining the exact composition of line and color, the distribution and balancing of light and shade. Every morning he came with his sketch book and several small canvas boards.

Seated on a mossy bank, concealed from the flying field by a thicket of brambles and wild gooseberry bushes, he would work now in his sketch book, with clever pencil, now with paint and lightning brushes on a canvas board. On some mornings the ox cart appeared and once the airplane made its flight at the same time, bringing back the identical rapture of the first impression. The artist took many snapshots of the oxen with his pocket camera to later refresh his memory when he

should begin work on the large canvas.

Another aviator had joined forces with Hartwell and Chester; that is, he had arrived at the flying field and was endeavoring to persuade the two partners to let him into their business. He had known Hartwell in some far-off day and country and did much talking of Auld Lang Syne. He had so worked upon Hartwell's feelings, with his hard luck tales, that the good-natured man had felt that he must give him a job for charity's sake.

"He is a good mechanic, is Buck," Hartwell had said to Chester. "He knows the flying business from izzard to gizzard and you can trust him with a machine."

"Perhaps, but he belies his looks if he is trustworthy," growled Chester. "Of course we do need a helper with all the

business that is coming our way. Keeping these two motors in perfect order and taking up the whole population of the country, white and black, is more than we can manage. But I don't like the looks of this Buck."

"Poor fellow, I reckon he doesn't like his own looks much! Lost half his chin in the Dardanelles and got that sabre cut on his cheek fighting with the Foreign Legion. You shouldn't be hard on him because of these honorable scars."

"Perhaps not—certainly he is nobody's pretty boy. Hire him, if you want to. I only hope he will not feel he must live up to his countenance," laughed Chester. So Buck was hired.

When Richard Price saw the new man across the field he had a feeling he had seen him before. There was something vaguely familiar about the set of

the shoulders, the long lean arms and the almost imperceptible bow of his left leg. He did not get a closer view of Buck until that worthy had been with Hartwell and Chester for two weeks. The artist was completely absorbed in his work. He had started several canvasses of the same composition, painted at different hours of the day.

One morning he was busily engaged on his picture when he was suddenly aware of a conversation on the other side of the thick bushes. He recognized Deci's comically high voice with its quick laugh, its clipped g's and evaded r's. The man's voice he did not know, although he felt he had heard it before. Peeping through a thin place in the bushes he saw that it was the new man, Buck.

"Whatcher doing, sister?"

"Pickin' gooseberries. Th'ain't nothin' so tasty as green gooseberry pie."

"Where do you live?"

"Live with my white folks! Whar you reckon?"

"Who are your white folks?"

"Humph! You can't know much if you don't know my white folks, Mister. They's the fines' folks in Tennessee."

"Rich?"

"Don't say a word! Why, my folks is so rich they don't know how to git shet er their money. They's fairly wallowin' in money but they don't boast none. They's too 'ristrocratical. They don't like to put on no airs. Plenty er folks don't even know they got so much money."

"Any children?"

"Any children! Hey, mister, you musta come from powerful fur away

not ter know that Josephime air their child."

"I don't even know your people's name yet."

"Their name is Estes—Major and Mrs. Joseph Estes what was an' is Miss Minerva. They's got one chil', Josephime, an' one niece named Billy. Billy is growed so big we-alls haveter call him Mr. Billy now, but Josephime air still jes' plain Josephime."

"How old is this Josephine?"

"She ain't so ol'. I reckon she's not so ol' as I am but she's bigger kase she don't never have much wuck to do. My gran'mammy says wuck makes black folks' laigs short, kinder stumps they growth. But my brother, Wilkes Booth Lincoln, has been a wuckin' always an' his laigs have growed so long they took him inter the movies. The newspaper

says he's the Black Diament er Ten-I-see. Anyhow he acts so much he makes whole heaps er money an' he sends it all home fer the Major to bank fer him. The Major is so useter bankin' money it ain't no trouble fer him."

"I guess this Major Estes is very fond of his daughter," suggested the man.

"Fond of Josephime! Say, Mister, there never was a ol' man livin' who loved nobody so much as our Major loves Josephime. He thinks mo' of her than he does of his eyes an' tongue an' years. He loves her so sometimes he gits to trimblin' when she comes up to him. Aunt Cindy says he loves her so much kase he wa' a ol' man when she wa' bawn an' he never expected so much luck as sich a pretty chil' as our Josephime. He wants her to eat off'n gol' plates every day."

"Gold plates! Are they so rich they eat from gold plates?"

"Sho'! Gol' plates an' silver gobblers!"

Richard Price laughed softly to himself behind the gooseberry bushes. What a little braggart this Decimus Ultimus was!

"There ain't nothin' on Gawd's green yearth Major won't give Josephime but Miss Minerva kinder holds him down. She believes in savin' money even if you are millium hairs. Major would buy Josephime a flyin' machine to-morrow if Miss Minerva wa'n't so stiff-laced an' straight-necked."

"Does Josephine want to fly?"

"Does she? Say, that white gal would rather take a trip up in the air than have all the money her popper has got in the bank to spend for her very

own. She can't talk about nothin' else—specially since I done got took up by mistake."

At this point in the conversation

Richard Price became so absorbed in his drawing that he did not heed what the ugly Buck said to the colored girl. At any rate it would have been difficult for

him to follow the talk as the man lowered his tone to a whisper as though fearing that even gooseberries might hear what he was saying. And this is what he did say:

"How would you like to give your little white friend a real treat?"

"You mean ice cream cone?"

"No, much better than that! I mean let her sit in an airplane even if she doesn't go up in it. Just see how it feels to sit in one."

"I 'low she'd like that."

"Then tell her to come over here early to-morrow morning and I'll be here and let her sit in mine. Her mother never said she couldn't sit in one, did she?"

"No, sir!"

"Well, nobody will know the difference and even if they do it is no harm for

a poor little rich girl to sit in a flying machine while it isn't flying. You tell her I'll be here tinkering around the engine and I'll let her sit in the passenger's seat while I am at work. Don't let anybody hear you tell her. There is no use in telling our business to everybody, is there, sister?"

"Sho' there ain't! I kin keep the shettist mouf you ever seed. I 'low I'll come along wif Josephime."

"Now see here, sister, you'll do nothing of the kind. You let the little white girl come by herself or I won't allow her to sit in the airplane while I am working on the engine. You hear me?" He looked quite sternly at Deci and his ugly face was uglier than ever.

"Yes, I hear," Deci said sharply, and in a low tone to herself she added, "but I don't heed yer."

As Buck walked away Richard Price paused a moment in his sketch and heard the man call back to Deci:

"Don't forget, sister. And mind what I told you."

And Deci answered: "I ain't forgittin'."

"Forgetting what?" mused the artist. He peeped through the bushes again and got a clear view of the man. His memory flashed back to war time in France. Of course it was that thieving American who had got himself into so much trouble in the French village. It was the same set to the shoulders, the same lean, long arms and slight bow to the left leg. The scar on his cheek and injury to his chin had been added since those days. He remembered the voice and peculiar drawling qualities.

"His name wasn't Buck then; it was

Ben Peters. Anyhow, he is a shady character. I guess I'd better tip off Hartwell and Chester. But perhaps he has reformed. No use in keeping a man down. After all, it is none of my business."

CHAPTER XV

KIDNAPED!

ECI came back with her bucket full of green gooseberries and as she and Josephine sat in the big swing stemming them for pies there was much whispered talk between the two little girls.

"He ain't so pretty to look at but he sho' is pleasant spoke, that there white man. He says th'ain't a speck er harm in anybody settin' in the airplame whilst he's wuckin' on the 'chinery."

"I can't see any harm in it either," sighed Josephine. "If I went up in it that would be not mindin' my mother, but jes' sittin' still an' see how it feels wouldn't be bad a bit. I could kinder

shut my eyes an' 'tend like I was flyin'."

"Sho' you could! The white man says I needn't be a comin' along with you. I reckon he ain't crazy 'bout black folks gettin' in his ol' plame ever sence I stole that there ride."

"But I'd lots rather you went along, Deci."

"You needn't think I ain't gonter be right thar, although that there Mr. Buck ain't gonter know it. We'll git a nice early start as soon as you swallow yo' breakfus' an' I'll crope out befo' Aunt Cindy kin ketch me an' whin you gits up in the seat I won't be fur behime you—if any."

The mysterious whispering kept up through the day. That night Josephine dreamed beautiful dreams of flying through the air on a great black crow that had a face like Deci's but a nice fat

back like Aunt Cindy's. Morning found her in a twitter of excitement. Even Billy and Jimmy had not been allowed to get in an airplane. It was fun indeed to get ahead of Billy and Jimmy in an adventure. It was easy to wheedle an early breakfast out of Aunt Cindy, who thought whatever Josephine wanted she must have.

"Whe'fo' you so emergentic this mawnin', chil'?"

"Oh, I don't know! I waked up an' I felt so hungry I thought you wouldn't mind if I ate kinder early. But if it's any trouble—"

"No trouble fer ol' Cindy, honey baby. I'm too glad to see you studyin' 'bout yo' victuals. The oben's hot an' it won't take no time ter bake this fust batch er biscuits."

"Could I eat on the back porch?"

"Sho'! Here, Deci, fix a place on the back po'ch so this here chil' air got a fitten place ter eat. An' you stay out thar an' wait on her."

It was coming out as Josephine and Deci had planned. Deci was able to snatch a breakfast for herself while waiting on Josephine. Aunt Cindy thought she had never seen Josephine eat biscuits so hurriedly. It was almost the rapid fire method that Billy employed.

"That chil' will be as fat as the Major if she keeps this up," the old woman chuckled. She would have felt differently could she have seen Deci's bulging pocket.

"Thank you ever so much, Aunt Cindy," said Josephine prettily. "Now I'll go out in the swing and sew."

"Humph! Done got sancterfied,"

said Aunt Cindy who well knew Josephine's aversion to the needle. Then the old woman busied herself about breakfast for the rest of the family and thought no more of Josephine.

When they got around the house the two little girls flew like the wind down the quiet early morning street. In a twinkling they had reached the outskirts of the town and the flying field.

"Yonder's Mr. Buck a wuckin' on the en-jine. You walk up an' tell him who you is an' I'll crope aroun' the side so's he won't see me an' whin you gits in the rumble I'll be thar already unbeknownst ter the gem'man."

Josephine walked confidently towards the plane where the ugly Buck was at work. So lightly she trod the dew drenched grass her feet seemed to be winged. She felt as though she

might be floating through the air as in her dream. Her little feet made no noise on the turf as she tripped across the flying field. She stood for a moment looking at the mechanic as he tested and tightened bolts. What an ugly mug was his! Mother Nature had not done much in the way of beauty for this, her son, and Father Time had managed to batter and mar any semblance of good looks he might have started out with. Certainly the long scar down one cheek and the mutilated condition of his chin had not improved him any.

"Good morning, Mr. Buck!" said Josephine, softly.

The man looked up from his work. His eyes narrowed and he took off his cap with a smirk. What a little beauty she was! He was hardly prepared to see an angel and Josephine did look like

an angel with the morning sun shining through her bright hair and giving the effect of a halo behind her pretty ethereal little face.

"Well, little lady, and what can I do for you?" he said slyly.

"Why Deci told me you said—said I might sit in your plane while you worked on the machinery. But maybe you were just foolin'."

"Deci! You mean that little black girl I saw yesterday?"

"I mean my little colored friend. Deci ain't black—not real black."

"Oh, I remember now! She said your folks wouldn't let you fly and she begged me to let you climb in and pretend you were up in the air. I guess you'd like to put on the goggles and warm coat and all and feel like a real flyer—eh, little lady?"

"That would be fine!" Josephine's eyes sparkled with happiness.

Buck fastened on the great goggles and enveloped the little girl in a huge leather coat and then lifted her into the plane, fastening the strap around her waist and buckling it securely.

"You know how to play true, don't you, Mr. Buck?"

"Sure! I am a great kidder," laughed the man. Josephine did not like him much when he laughed. His scar got so purple and his laughter was so hard and dry.

"There's a blanket for your legs if they get cold," he continued.

"Oh, I won't be cold, it's such a warm morning," said the child. She well knew that her darling Deci was hid under that same blanket. She had seen her darting around the plane while the

man was talking and knew she had stowed away under the blanket. With her toes she could feel Deci's wiry little body and smiled happily at the reassuring little pat on her ankle.

"All set, little lady?" asked Buck.

"All set!" Josephine called happily. After all he must be a real nice man to pretend so readily. Only nice people pretended—nice people like her daddy. Of course, some persons who were nice did not pretend—for instance, her mother. Josephine reached down under the blanket and clasped Deci's hand. Then she shut her eyes and made believe she was really flying. She did not see Buck as he put on goggles and aviator's cap and a leather coat. He was careful to do this out of her line of vision. Then he crouched down, ran along the side of the machine, gave the

propeller a twirl and in a moment was in the driver's seat as the plane sped along the ground and then took the air like a gull with outstretched wings.

Josephine opened her eyes and took a deep breath. Flying! She was really flying! Her eyes behind the great goggles danced and sparkled.

"Deci, Deci! Come from under the blanket. We are up in the air!"

Deci's little head popped up like a jack-in-the-box and her wrapped plaits stood on end.

"'Fo' Gawd, if we ain't!" she shouted. "That there scar-face done put it over on yo' maw."

"Well, since we are flyin' I reckon we might just as well enjoy ourselves. We've got a lot of splainin' to do when we land."

But Deci's little face was drawn with

worry. It was all very well for her beloved Josephine to enjoy herself, but the fear of foul play on the part of Buck had crept into the little colored girl's mind. She remembered with contrition how she had told the man of the Major's fabulous wealth, boasting of gold plates and silver goblets and great sums of money in the bank.

"He's a stealer," she moaned. "He's kidnapperin' Josephime."

"What did you say?" yelled Josephine. "I can't hear a thing for the noise of this machine."

"I said that ol' scar-face is kidnapperin' you. I reckon when he finds out he's got me along too he'll just naturally kill me. But I'm glad I'm here. Maybe he won't kill me daid an' so long as there's a piece er me lef' I'll be scratchin' an' fightin' fer you."

The delight of being up in the air paled for Josephine. How sneaky the man had been! How sly! Even if he only intended to take her for a little ride and would bring her safely home he should not have done it when he well knew how opposed her mother was to her going up in a flying machine. She might have known he had some sinister motive when he refused to have Deci come with her. The goggles and warm coat might have given her an inkling too. Ah well! She had Deci with her at any rate and she had never yet seen Deci worsted.

"What makes you think he's kidnapin' me?" she asked, putting her mouth close to Deci's ear.

"I don't think—I knows," said Deci. "Look! There's home most down under us."

"There's Aunt Cindy feedin' the chickens," exclaimed Josephine.

"Pull off yo' slipper an' throw it down," commanded Deci.

Deci did not wait for Josephine to pull off her shoe. She snatched it off herself and threw it with great force over the side of the airplane.

Aunt Cindy's "Chick, chick, chick, chick, chickee!" was cut short as in the midst of her flock of leghorns fell Josephine's little shoe.

"Right outer the sky! Right outer a flyin' machine! My Gawd, if that there chil' ain't up yonder! She done outwitted her maw. I reckon Miss Minerva'll about go crazy. Well, I can't blame Josephime much fer what I done did myself. Co'se her maw tol' her not to, but like as not if my mammy hadder had her say-so in the matter she'der put

her foot down flat 'bout my flyin' same as Miss Minerva's done. I reckon I won't tell on the chil'—not yet awhile anyhow." Aunt Cindy picked up the little shoe and put it in her capacious pocket.

CHAPTER XVI

MINERVA'S HOUR OF TRIAL

UCK—alias Ben Peters, was not the only person at work early that morning. Richard Price had snatched an early breakfast and when the sun was yet low in the heavens, casting wonderful shadows across the dew laden grass, he had set up his easel behind the gooseberry bushes and was hard at work endeavoring to catch the color of the new day and put it on canvas. He had seen Buck at work on the engine and had seen Josephine as she tripped across the grass and stood talking to the ugly Buck. He had seen Deci as she darted around the hangar and climbed into the machine while Buck's back was turned. He had

watched the man placing the goggles on the child and putting on the leather coat. Even then the significance of the thing had not struck him. He turned to go on with the painting that was engrossing his attention but happened to glance back through the bushes and caught sight of Buck as he crouchingly ran along the side of the plane, evidently determined to conceal from Josephine his actions. The motor had started and the plane was skimming along the ground before it came to Richard Price that this Ben Peters was flying away with the child, without doubt kidnaping her. The conversation he had heard between Decimus Ultimus and the man only the day before came back with added force and meaning.

"Villain!" he exclaimed, and hastily concealing his artist's materials in the

bushes he started on the run towards home.

Breathless he arrived at the Estes home but not so breathless that he could not speak. Without ringing the bell or waiting for permission to enter he walked in the front door, open to admit the morning breezes, and made his way to the dining room where Major and Mrs. Estes and Billy were seated at the breakfast table.

The genial Major arose from his seat and extended a cordial hand. Miss Minerva took on a severe expression and Billy choked on a corn cake.

"Do you know where your little daughter is?" Richard Price asked.

"In the swing, sewing," announced the mother.

"Why?" demanded the Major.

"She has been taken up in an airplane

by that fellow Buck and is out of sight long ago. They were flying due north when I saw them."

The Major's rosy cheeks turned pale and Miss Minerva dropped her coffee cup on the floor, smashing it into a hundred pieces. Although it was one of the Canton china breakfast set that she prized so highly, she didn't even bother to look at it again.

"Is she alone?" gasped the Major.

"No, Deci is with her but Buck does not know Deci is there. The child sneaked into the plane without his seeing her. I was sketching on the other side of the bramble hedge and happened to see it all."

"I don't believe a word of it!" declared Miss Minerva, recovering her nerve and losing her manners. "Josephine would not disobey me and I have

told her never to go up in a flying machine."

"But perhaps she didn't mean to go up—only sit in it," suggested Billy. "She asked me yesterday if I'd ever sat in one and when I told her no she looked kinder shiny eyed."

The Major was much embarrassed by his wife's rudeness but it was no time for parleying. He felt sure Richard Price was speaking the truth and it behooved them to act quickly. At that moment Aunt Cindy appeared and holding out Josephine's little shoe, said:

"Here's my baby's lil slipper drapped down on me a whilst back when I was out a feedin' the chickens. If you don't believe the gem'man, Miss Minerva, maybe you'll believe this slipper what you bought only las' week. I 'low the po' chil' was a givin' us a notion whar

she was boun' fer when she drapped her slipper."

"Like Hansel and Gretel," said Billy huskily. "I reckon she'll keep on dropping things."

Artists are supposed to be the most impractical of all persons but Richard Price proved himself to be very sane and level-headed in this time of emergency. The chief of police was immediately informed of the kidnaping of Josephine and Deci and he in turn communicated with every city and town in neighboring states with the request that the news be broadcast to all flying fields. An accurate description was given of the man and the two little girls. Afternoon papers all over the Union carried the story, even the fact of the shoe which had been dropped in Miss Minerva's back yard.

Poor Miss Minerva! She paced up and down the front walk, wringing her hands and with streaming eyes gazing into the sky, hoping against hope that every speck she saw there, every mote in a sunbeam, might turn into the plane bringing her darling back to her lonesome arms.

A soft little hand crept into hers. She stopped in her mad walk and looked down. It seemed as though years had been blotted out and it was little Josephine's hand seeking hers. It was Punkin, with a not very clean face but heavenly eyes raised to hers.

"I'm tellable sowy 'bout yo' lil 'irl an' I come over to tell you you kin crawl in my worry hole if you want to. It is a nice clean worry hole an' you kin say yo' prayers in there an' if you don't want anything wrong mo'n likely you'll

get it if you get in the worry hole an' stay right still while you are prayin'."

Then Miss Minerva did a strange thing for Miss Minerva. She knelt down, threw her arms around little Punkin and sobbed out:

"My child, help me to pray!"

"I'll do it all for you," volunteered Punkin. "I ain't got a thing to do an' I'd jes' as soon. But I kin do it bes' in my worry hole."

With that he ran to the hedge and squeezed himself through an infinitesimal crack that Miss Minerva did not know was there. Strangely comforted, Miss Minerva stood up and walked over to the hedge. This was the first time since the objectionable neighbors had moved in that Miss Minerva had set foot near the dividing line. Through the straggling top that she had purposely

left uncut she peered into the Prices' yard. Seated by the hated street car were the two youngest little girls, Susan and Patty. Both of them were crying bitterly.

"I lu-lu-loved her so-ho-ho much," sobbed Susan. "She lu-hoved me too but she couldn't say so-ho. I wi-hish that the ol' sca-har-faced man had kihid-na-haped me insteader her."

"I wish he'der stealed her mother cause she treats us all so mean. I believe when she reads her Bible 'bout sufferin' little children she thinks it means make 'em suffer."

"I don't believe she means any harm—she's jes' not got a understandin' heart like Pops. We ought to try an' forgive her, Patty, cause she's in a lotta trouble. If Josephine don't ever come back I may give her poor mother Geral-

dine. Geraldine is a lotta comfort when you get lonesome. She's got a understandin' heart, considerin' she's a turtle. She might learn Mrs. Estes something."

"Don't you think we'd bes' pray for Josephine to come back, Number Four? Prayin's mighty good."

"Le's sing a hymn instead."

"What hymn?"

"Le's sing 'Bring Back My Bonny To Me' only we can put in Josephine insteader Bonny."

"Le's sing it real solemn an' slow so's it'll be a hymn."

Ordinarily Miss Minerva would have considered it a sacrilege to call such a song a hymn, but now she closed her eyes and listened reverently to the foolish song. The children felt they were praying as they devoutly petitioned the unknown to bring back their Josephine.

"My Josie lies over the ocean,
My Josie lies over the sea,
My Josie lies over the ocean,
Then bring back my Josie to me.
Bring back, bring back, bring back my Josie to me, to me.
Bring back, bring back, bring back my Josie to me."

The morning wore on. Neighbors came and went, all of them meaning to be kind but many of them proving themselves to be Job's comforters with talk of Charley Ross who was stolen back in the seventies and never found. Others spoke of accidents in flying machines, others of little children being kidnaped and allowed to starve.

"Well, our Josephime won't starve yet awhile," asserted Aunt Cindy. "She done 'complished too many biscuits." She paused and pondered a moment. "But now I come ter think about it I 'low that there Deci done filled her

black stomic with mo'n half er them biscuit."

In the meantime the plane soared on, still heading north. The wicked, scar-faced man was satisfied that he had got the start of the sleepy little Tennessee town and could safely make a landing in a bluegrass pasture in Kentucky near a town where some birds of his own feather flocked and where he could hide poor little Josephine until he could communicate with her family, demanding a rich reward for her return. He knew nothing of Deci's being along nor did he dream of his departure having been seen by Richard Price.

"The little nigger'll be too scared to blab," he said to his wicked self, "and it will be hours before they'll miss the kid."

"Time to drap anudder shoe," Deci whispered to Josephine. "If you keep

on a drappin' ar-tickles folks'll know whar we're boun' fer an' follow us."

The plane was over a city. Josephine could see houses in orderly rows, so far below them that they looked like tiny match boxes, and trees no bigger than dwarf box bushes. A toy train was coming in on a toy track. A river, that must have been the Mississippi, though it looked like a little muddy creek, was bearing on its lead-colored bosom steamboats that seemed about like the ones little boys play with in park fountains, and the row boats on the stream were no bigger than walnut shells.

Josephine took off her other shoe and hurled it from the plane.

"Hi, there! Stop that!" yelled Buck. "Whatcher doing?"

"My shoe pinched," Josephine yelled back.

"Well something else will pinch when I get to you," the man threatened.

"What did he say?" Deci asked from down under the blanket.

"Said he'd pinch me," whimpered Josephine. "Oh Deci, I'm so scairt!"

"Don't you be scairt a mite," comforted the little colored girl. "Nobody ain't gonter hurt a hair er yo' haid whilst I's aroun'. Scar-face don't know I'm here an' when we hit groun' I'm gonter lay low until he gits his back turned an' then I'm gonter holler for help so loud the angul Gabrul'll hear me an' the perlice'll come a runnin'. You look back at that ol' devil Buck an' you smile yo' sweetes' jes' like you think he's done did you a favor a takin' you up in the ar. Don't let on you's scairt but jes' put yo' faith in me an' pray the good Gawd. Prayin' ain't never hurt nobody an'

they do say sometimes it wucks wonders. Anyhow you pray an' pray, but you smile at that there Buck fust."

Josephine did as she was bid and smiled through the goggles at the bad Buck. The man was somewhat astonished but rather pleased. After all, in the kidnaping business it was much pleasanter if the rich little victim took it good-naturedly. It would not be much fun to have a kicking, screaming child on your hands. No doubt this little Miss would be sensible. What a pretty child! No wonder her rich old father was so infatuated by her. He would give any sum to get her back.

"Darn if she ain't sweet an' pretty enough to bring fifty grand instead of twenty," the man muttered. "I was gonter ask twenty but I've a great mind to raise my bet." Josephine smiled

again and it was settled that the Major must pay fifty thousand to get her safely home.

They stayed up in the air so long that Josephine, worn out with fear and excitement, did the sensible thing and dozed. Deci, down under the blanket, did the same thing. The eternal hum of the motor soothed them as they became used to it. When it ceased, as the aviator made a long glide, the passengers awakened. Down through the air they floated. The green earth seemed to rise to meet them. Into a verdant pasture they swam. Surely the naughty Buck was a skillful flyer. They landed as lightly as thistledown.

"Well!" exclaimed Buck as he climbed stiffly from his seat in the plane.

"Well?" echoed Josephine, clutching tightly the steadying hand that Deci

had furnished her during the voyage, whether asleep or awake.

"Well, get out of there," commanded the man.

"Why?"

"Because I say so."

"Where are we?"

"None of your business!"

Josephine tried to smile but it was hard work. She allowed Buck to lift her from the plane. Deci lay concealed under the blanket. Where was that bad man going to take her Josephine? Wherever it was, Deci was going to follow and rescue her beloved friend.

"I reckon you'll be right sorry now that you threw away one of your shoes," he laughed sourly. "You'll have to go barefooted now or in your stocking feet. Where's your other shoe?"

"I threw that overboard too."

Buck pulled off his own leather coat and goggles and then Josephine's and threw them in on top of Deci.

"Now come on! We'll go visit some friends of mine. They live right there."

Deci peeped from her hiding place and saw at the far end of the grassy field a low rambling house that was part log cabin and part brick with a great chimney leaning against it. Both chimney and house seemed much the worse for wear. The house leaned against the chimney with as much of a slant as the chimney leaned against the house.

Buck caught the girl by the arm and pulled her towards the house. It was all Josephine could do to control herself. She wanted to cry out to Deci for help but she remembered what she had counseled and choked back the scream

that almost came out. Deci popped her head up from under the blanket and coats and waved reassuringly to poor Josephine as she looked back, agony depicted on her face. Buck, all unconscious of Deci's presence, lit a cigarette and then proceeded with rapid strides towards the house of his friends.

Deci was out of the plane like a flash and running towards the road. She must find somebody to help and the road was the place for people. She decided it would be wiser to stay on the road near the house where they had taken her beloved, and she was determined to stop the first passer-by.

No one passed for many minutes. The child sat by the roadside and wondered what time it was and where she was and what was happening to Josephine.

"I reckon we's most to where Wilkes

Booth Lincoln lives," she said to herself, "an' I reckon it's most time for day after to-morrow's dinner. I'm as empty

as a drum. I hopes they is feedin' my Josephime."

She heard the whirr of a distant motor and then a powerful car came into sight.

"They may run me down but they's

gotta stop," she muttered and stepped into the road waving her brown arms like a tiny windmill.

The car did stop and two men in khaki sprang from it. It was full of men in khaki, at least seven of them.

"'Fo' Gawd if they ain't p'licemens!" She ran to them, crying out excitedly: "If you is p'licemen come quick an' if you ain't come anyhow. They're kidnapperin' my Josephime."

News travels very fast in this day and generation. Richard Price had not burned up the telephone and telegraph wires for nothing. Every town and village and hamlet within a radius of five hundred miles knew that a man with a scarred face and part of his chin shot away had flown off in a stolen plane with a pretty little girl with one shoe off and one shoe on. The shoe played an

important part in the news. When the other shoe was thrown from the plane over Memphis the scent was taken up by the minions of the law and that plane marked as the guilty one. The car full of policemen stopped by Deci was actually out trailing the kidnaper.

"They're up yonder in that crooked house," cried Deci. "Ol' Scar-face done took my angel by the arm an' drug her up yonder. He don't know I wa' hid under the blanket. He thinks he done got my Josephime fer sho' an' I reckon he's gonter try an' git all the Major's money to han' her back."

"We'll attend to that," spoke up the police sergeant.

"Lawdy, I do so love it when white folks come erlong an' say they'll 'tend ter things," sighed Deci. "I been 'tendin' ter things so hard ever sence

Josephime an' me got flewed off with."

Silently and in order the policemen marched up to the crooked house and surrounded it, a delegation taking care of the back door and another of the front.

Inside the house, in the big low room that served as kitchen and dining room, Buck and Josephine were at the moment seated at a table, eating cornbread and cabbage washed down with buttermilk. At first Josephine had felt she could not eat a mouthful because she was so frightened, but the smell of the food made her realize that she was quite as hungry as frightened and that food was necessary to keep up her spirits. She even smiled at the slab-sided old woman who dished up this homely dinner for them. She was the only person at home but she told Buck that her sons

would be back from the store in half an hour or so and in the meantime he was to make himself at home. She seemed to be a kindly old person in spite of her friendliness to Buck. She pressed food upon Josephine until it was ludicrous.

"Do have a hot pone," she drawled. "They ain't nasty. Now if you don't like my victuals you kin jes' spit 'em out an' no hard feelin'. Thar's mo' room outside than in if victuals ain't ter yo' likin'."

"You'd best eat, girl," Buck said roughly. "You've gotta write a letter to your pappy before long and you'll need strength to say what I'm gonter make you say—and that letter will cost him fifty grand."

At that moment the door flew open and in marched the policemen with drawn revolvers.

"Reach for your hat!" barked the sergeant.

Buck's expression was extremely ludicrous as he suddenly found himself faced by a roomful of policemen with menacing guns. One of them stepped quickly forward and with exceeding deftness handcuffed the surprised Buck.

Thereupon the grinning Deci popped from behind a bulky officer of the law, her pigtails standing out with arrogant pride.

Buck's disfigured jaw dropped. "You imp! How did you get here?" he growled.

"You brung me in yo' airyplame. You mus' be foolish, man, if you think I was a gonter let my Josephime go sit in yo' airyplame an' me not be with her to look after her. I been all time a lookin' after my Josephime. I'm sho' sorry it turned

out so peaceable. I'd a been right down proudified, Mr. Buck, to a seen a little buckshot in yo' hide. But you looked dicklesome enough settin' thar with yo' mouth full er cawn pone an' buttermilk. Hi! Yi! Ain't you glad ter see me, though!"

"Well, I'll be hung!" Buck gasped.

"No, I'm afraid you won't be," said the sergeant, "but you can come along with us now."

Josephine thanked the old slab-sided woman very prettily for the cabbage and cornbread and buttermilk. The old woman was filled with thankfulness that her sons had not returned. They, no doubt, would have been involved with Buck, alias Ben Peters, in his kidnaping scheme. As it was, they could truthfully swear that they knew nothing about it.

As the rescue party and the prisoner left the crooked house and started across the green pasture there came the roaring exhaust of an airplane. It was flying low and circling.

"Wigwag them," the police sergeant commanded. "I've a hunch they are looking for us."

The plane gave a graceful swoop and glide and in a moment was parked not far from where Buck had landed not much more than an hour before.

Hartwell sprang from the pilot's seat and then who should come rolling out but the Major himself? Then followed Chester.

"Daddy, Daddy!" sobbed Josephine.

The dear old Major sat down flat on the green blue grass and took his little daughter in his arms.

"I never meant to do wrong. Mr.

Buck sent me word I could come sit in his plane while he worked on the engine. I never knew he'd fly away with me. He told the old woman up there he was gonter get fifty grand for me. What's a grand?"

"I fancy he meant fifty thousand dollars. He little knew you were worth a million but that I would have had a hard time raising ten thousand. Well, we've got you safe now and as soon as we telephone your poor mother we'll start back home."

"Flying?"

"Of course. Mustn't we get back to your mother as soon as possible?"

Hartwell and Chester were glad to find their stolen plane. It was in perfect condition. Certainly Buck was a good mechanic and a careful aviator.

Soon the adventurers were on their

homeward flight. The Major had telephoned his anxious wife from a nearby inn and at the same time bought a sumptuous repast for all. Everybody was hungry, but it seemed Deci was the hollowest of all. Later she had much to tell of the manner of frying chicken in Kentucky and how folks in the blue-grass country made pastry. Nothing escaped the Argus-eyed Deci.

And now once more in the air! Josephine resumed the great leather coat and goggles. Deci wrapped up in the blanket and sat very straight.

"It's sho' good to be a flyin' 'thout scroochin' down an' hidin'. That las' fly I took wa'n't no good a-tall with me kivered up the whole endurin' time."

Josephine and the Major were very quiet during that flight. They held hands like veritable lovers, the

old man and the little girl.

"Suppose—only suppose," the Major kept saying to himself.

As they neared home Josephine said:

"Well, Daddy, at last we've flown. I reckon you never would have got up in the air if it hadn't have been for me'n Deci."

"I suppose not. And we might just as well enjoy it," the Major smiled.

The whole town was out to welcome them as they landed at the flying field at dusk. Hartwell's plane in front with the passengers and Chester close behind with the stolen plane.

Miss Minerva was there. She was seated in Richard Price's car, the top down so that they might catch the first glimpse of the approaching planes. On the seat by her were Patty and Susan, Punkin was in her lap, and on the floor

was Geraldine. The rest of the Prices were on the front seat, all of them on their good behavior and determined not to worry the poor lady whose child had been kidnaped.

Miss Minerva's face was gentle and her eyes were soft with much feeling. Billy and Jimmy, who were hovering near, were much impressed by the change in the erstwhile stern Minerva.

"There they come!"

"There they come!"

It might have been Lindbergh himself landing. There were shouts of welcome as the planes glided to the earth. Miss Minerva sat in the car. She could not trust her legs to carry her to meet her darling. She held on tight to Punkin and he held on tight to her, although the rest of the occupants of the Ford clambered out to greet the arrivals.

"Where is your Aunt Minerva?" the Major demanded of Billy.

Billy pointed to the disreputable Ford belonging to Richard Price. Major Estes and Josephine hurried to embrace the wife and mother.

"My dear, my dear!" cried the Major.

"My darlingest mother!" from Josephine.

When the hugs were over Miss Minerva remarked quietly:

"I have made the acquaintance of my neighbors in your absence and my dearest wish is that all of you will become good friends."

Billy and Jimmy giggled, and Jimmy said:

"Jes' as if we haven't been all the time crazy about Miss Minerva's neighbors."